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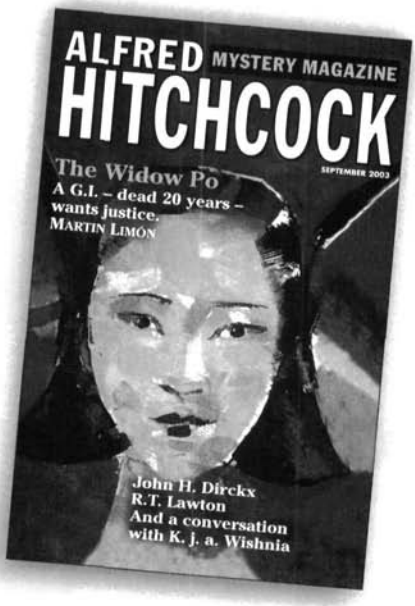

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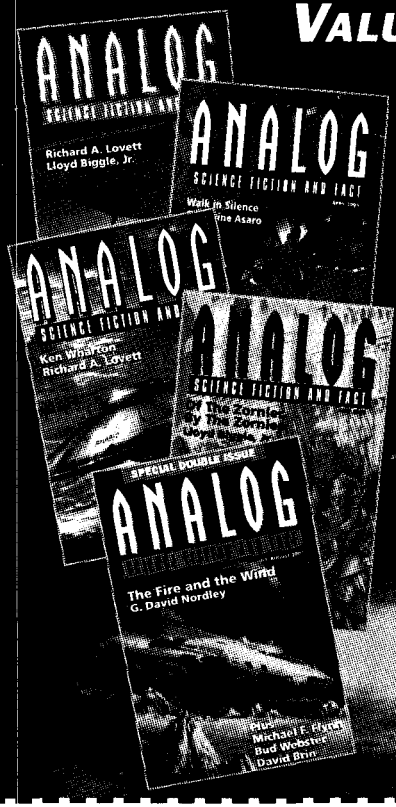

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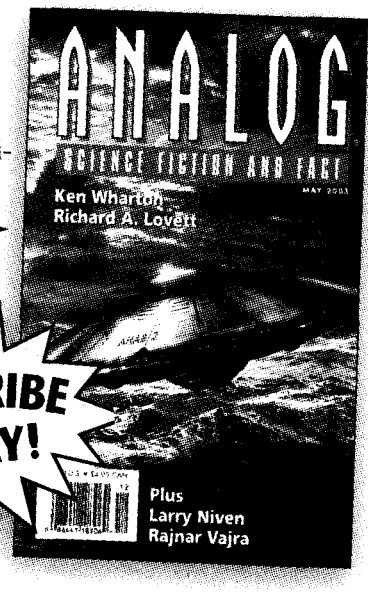

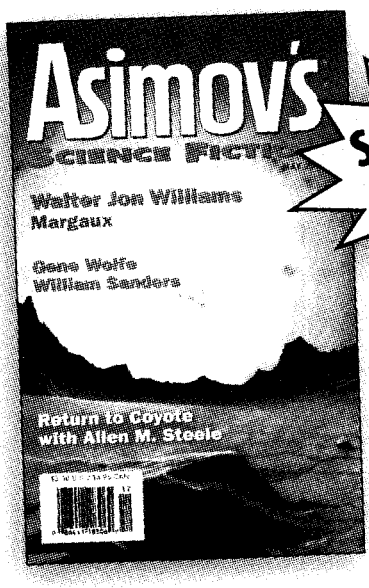

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Art by Laurie Harden

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

by Doug Allyn

I hate Fridays. During the last years of my marriage Fridays meant a fresh weekend of warfare, arguing with Norma or enduring sulky silences. Our spats were like uncivil wars, nasty, relentless, and mostly about nothing. But still better than the apathy we felt at the end.

Since our divorce I don't have to face Norma on weekends. Or anyone else. After eighteen years I'm back in a one-bedroom walk-up only slightly bigger than my dorm room in college. A bachelor pad barren as a barracks, decorated with regrets.

Fortunately, it came furnished. Norma carried off every stick we owned when she bailed out. Took the car. Even took the dog. Loaded our life into a Mayflower van while I was away on business and hauled it all to California, lock, stock, and Labrador.

Sometimes I think I miss my dog more than my ex. But what I miss even more is losing the chance to fix things, somehow. So we could live happily ever after. Or at least part friends.

Holiday Fridays are especially tough. The week before Christmas, carols in the air, snow on the ground. Street lamps and store-

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fronts decorated with beaming Santas, glistening angels. Commuters humming home to their families.

Reminding me that most of my home is now in faraway Fresno, where my ex-wife is living with a CPA. And I'm still stuck in Saginaw, number-six man on a shrinking, hundred-cop police force that used to field a hundred and fifty-five officers.

Debbie, the desk clerk, buzzed me.

"Somebody to see you, Lieutenant. He says it's personal."

"Who?"

"Elijah Smith."

Name didn't register. "Send him back."

Certain authors have become regulars in our Christmas issues in recent years, especially Doug Allyn, James Powell, and Steve Hockensmith. There's a perennial appeal to the Christmas mystery, with its highlighted contrast between criminality and the good will the season is supposed to bring. The treatment may be humorous, as in Mr. Hockensmith's story, allegorical, as in Mr. Powell's, or serious, as in this poignant Allyn tale. ¶

With a name like Elijah I half expected a preacher. Got the exact opposite. A young soldier in uniform. A marine, wearing immaculate dress blues. And a lot of bandages. The left side of his face was burn-scarred, the skin mottled, shiny with ointment. The burn distorted his mouth, baring his teeth in a permanent snarl. His jaw and throat were wrapped with clean white gauze. He rapped smartly on the doorframe.

"Come in, take a pew. What can I do for you?"

"Maybe nothing. Are you the Sam Cash who played tight end for Michigan State?"

"I used to be. About a million years ago."

"Twenty years, actually, give or take," he said, easing into a chair, scanning my face intently.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's a little complicated. Do you remember dating a girl at State named Mary Hanner?"

"Not offhand, but there were—"

"She said you were a junior that year."

It still didn't register—and then it did. Big girl, frizzy hair, wide shoulders. "You mean T.J.?"

"T.J.?"

"It was her . . . nickname, you know. We ran in the same crowd, it's what everybody called her. I'd almost forgotten her real name."

"Her name was Mary Catherine. How do you get T.J. out of that?"

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"Who knows? State was a long time ago. And you are . . . ?"

"Her son. Lance Corporal Elijah Smith, U.S. Marine Corps."

I scanned his face for a resemblance but the bandages and the years made it a tough read.

"How is T—Mary?"

"Dead," he said. With no expression. "She died six weeks ago."

"I'm sorry." And I truly was. She was barely a wisp of memory to me but I don't have many to spare. Another piece of my past gone forever. "What happened?"

"She took her own life. Sleeping pills. She's been nursing my father for the past couple of years. Pancreatic cancer. When he died she . . . " He swallowed. "Apparently she chose not to go on. Something like that."

"I really am very sorry," I repeated. Didn't know what else to say. Christmas music was murmuring over the station's public address system. Mantovani. *Silver bells, silver bells . . .*

"The thing is, she left two notes. Two suicide notes. One for the world in general; one for me, personally. Do you recognize any of these names?"

He slid a slip of paper across the desk to me. Five names, in alphabetical order, mine at the top. Samuel Cash.

"I know these guys, or I used to, back in the day. What about them?"

"One of them is my father. My biological father, I mean."

I didn't say anything. Couldn't. Just stared.

"Yeah, it was a shock to me, too. My mom and dad were good Baptists, very active in the church. Hard to think of her . . . sleeping around. Like a whore."

"It wasn't like that. We were just kids, younger then than you are now. It was a different time, a different world. Are you a virgin, marine?"

"Not hardly, but you always figure your mom was, right? Anyway, I've got no beef with my mother or whatever happened back then. She's in a better place now. And as far as I'm concerned, Tom Smith was my real father. Taught me to ride a bike, throw a pass. Wiped my nose, paddled my ass when I needed it. He's my real dad. Or he was."

"Then why are you here?"

"To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. I was gonna let it slide, you know? Forget the whole damn thing. I'm stationed at Twentynine Palms, waiting for plastic surgery on my face—"

"How did you get hurt?"

"Dumb-ass accident. Nothing dramatic. We were incinerating classified documents and something blew up, probably an empty paint can some jarhead left in a burn bag. It looks worse than it is."

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"Looks like it hurts."

"Some. The doctors say they can patch me up good as new, though. The guy working beside me lost an eye."

"Tough break."

"It has been one hell of an interesting year," he admitted. "After my mother's funeral I got to thinking about the list, and what it cost her to leave it for me. So I decided to follow it up. Like Santa Claus. To find out who's naughty or nice."

"Just curiosity?"

"No. A lot stronger than that. If you were me, wouldn't you want to meet your father? Have a conversation?"

"What kind of a conversation?"

"Private. Between him and me."

"That almost sounds like a threat."

"He probably won't like what I have to say. I'm not exactly bringing good news. Joy to the world and all that."

"Maybe not. Look, why don't you let me handle this for you?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, for openers, I'm a cop. I can find people."

"I've already done that. Internet search. Four, including you, are still in this area. Fred Murphy lives in Chicago."

"I'm also used to dealing with . . . sensitive situations. Some of these guys have families now—wives, kids. You showing up out of the blue will be quite a jolt."

"Because of my face, you mean? Merry Christmas, Pop, it's your long-lost son, Frankenstein? Relax, Lieutenant, I'm not looking for trouble. I don't want anything from you or anybody else. I just want to meet the guy and have a chat. Friendly or otherwise, that's up to him."

"At least let me contact the men on your list first to see if they want to talk to you. Maybe save some hurt feelings all around."

"I'm hurting already," he said bluntly, rising, snatching up his list. "And I didn't come all this way to hang around like a damn wallflower hopin' somebody will ask me to dance. Thanks for your time, Lieutenant."

"Hold on, troop, where are you going?"

"On to the next name. You're not the guy."

"How do you know?"

"I've been studying your face, listening to your voice. Nothing seems . . . familiar to me."

"And you think it will?"

"I hope so. I mean, if there's no real connection between us, what's the point? Do you recognize anything? In me, I mean?"

"No, but I'm not sure it works that way. Kids don't always look like their parents or even each other. Hell, some twins don't look alike."

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"True, but on some level I still think I'll know him. How's your father?"

"Mine? Okay, I guess. He's retired, living in Florida."

"You're lucky, then. You said you know some of the guys on my list. How about it? Do you think I resemble any of them?"

"I can't really say. I'd only be guessing. It wouldn't be fair to them or to you."

"Go ahead and guess. Believe me, I'm getting used to things that aren't fair."

"No, I'd rather not, but I'll tell you what I will do. If you don't . . . recognize anybody, I'll take a blood test. DNA doesn't lie."

"No need for that. You're not the guy. I think I'll know him. If I don't, well, maybe he'll be happier if we don't meet anyway. Thanks for seeing me. Merry Christmas, Lieutenant."

"You, too." I offered my hand but he turned away. Maybe he didn't notice. Or maybe he did.

After he left I rose and went to the window, watched him cross the parking lot, leaning into the wind. A very determined young man. And down deep, an angry one. I guess he had a right to some rage. He'd definitely had a rough year.

I wondered what he looked like minus the bandages. And whether fathers and sons would really know each other on some intuitive level. Blood calling to blood across the generations. Or something.

Tried to remember his mother. Couldn't recall her face clearly, only her voice, a few mannerisms. Small-town girl. First time away from home. State: a crash course in life—History of Western Civ., sex, Botany, keg parties, Psych. 101, more sex, all crammed into a few hectic semesters.

Caught a glimpse of the marine's car as he pulled out of the lot: a rental Chevy Cavalier, red as a Santa suit. Watched his taillights disappear. Stood there awhile longer, thinking. Christmas music still playing. "Greensleeves," now.

No. Not "Greensleeves." For the holidays, the old melody had different lyrics, and a different title. "What Child Is This?"

I sat down and started making some calls.

Crowded bar, Friday night. John Law's on Hamilton Street in Saginaw's Old Town district, half a block from the courthouse. The din of lawyers, clerks, bailiffs, and bondsmen talking shop, talking trash, cutting deals, soaking up rumors or starting them, Anne Murray on the jukebox, dreaming of a White Christmas.

No smoke. John Law's went smokeless the same week New York City did, in sympathy or sarcasm, I was never sure.

Smoke-free does improve visibility, though. I spotted Bruce Drummond the moment he came in. Knew his swagger as I knew

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my own. Big Bruce. Heavier now by forty pounds than when we played ball together, paunchy, his fading blond hair worn long, combed over a bald spot. Sporting a green and white sweater with the State Spartan logo, battling old man Time every grim step of the way. Like the rest of us.

He waved to me, picked up a pitcher and four glasses at the bar, made his way through the crush to my booth. It took him awhile. Everybody knows Big Bruce from his car-lot commercials, the crazy guy who smashes Ford prices and windshields with a sledgehammer. It's a dumb ad, but people remember it and I guess it sells cars. Or maybe Bruce just likes wrecking things.

Sliding in across from me, Bruce poured two glasses, pushed one to me. We toasted each other silently and drank. Bruce downed his glass with one long swallow and refilled it.

"Good to see you, Sammy. Am I under arrest?"

"I don't know yet. What have you been up to?"

"Tell you later. What's going on?"

Before I could answer, Roger Vanetti slid into the booth beside Bruce, beaming a beery hello. Short, pudgy, wearing a red blazer and a graying beard, Rog could pass for a bargain-basement Santa. A doper defense attorney with a shady client list, Roger looks a little grimy to me nowadays. Maybe the grunge from his customers is rubbing off.

"Counselor," Bruce said sourly. "Screwed any more old friends lately?"

"Hey, it was strictly business, Bruce." Roger grinned. "Anyway, it didn't cost you a damn thing. Your insurance company paid the settlement."

"And jacked up my premiums to cover it, you two-bit shyster."

"What are you two talking about?" I asked.

"One of Roger's hophead clients sued Bruce for wrongful termination," Johnny Lawrence said, pulling a chair up beside our booth. "Bruce is annoyed."

"It was a crock," Bruce griped. "The clown came in too stoned to work half the time. I cut him a break by firing him instead of calling the cops, letting them search his locker. Next thing I know, my pal Roger is suing me. I oughta knock your block off."

"Swing away, old buddy," Roger said mildly. "I've always wanted to own a big car dealership and a fancy house."

"You won't enjoy 'em much from a wheelchair."

Johnny sighed. "Cork it, you two, or I'll have the bouncer throw you out."

"You can't throw me out," Bruce said. "I own this booth. And part of that one, too."

John Law's is Johnny's saloon, purchased with a little help from his friends, mostly Bruce. Since Johnny's name was on the

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marine's list, it seemed a logical place to meet. He'd played his way through State, tinkling the piano at frat parties and umpty-ump Lansing lounges. Easygoing, tall, dark, and slim as a whippet, Johnny's still a lady's man. Sliding by on charm.

"So what's up, Sam?" he asked, turning to me. "Is this about the marine with the Frankenstein face?"

"You've met him?"

"Nope, but he was in earlier asking for me. Said he'd be back. Scared hell out of my barmaid. Who is he?"

"It's a long story. Do you guys remember a girl from State, Mary Hanner? T.J.?"

"Thunderjugs?" Bruce leered. "I remember her. Chunky chick, huge boobs. Bet she's big as a building now."

"She's dead, six weeks ago. Suicide. The marine is her son. Elijah Smith. Thing is, she left him a note saying one of us is his biological father."

Dead silence. Then Johnny whistled softly, shaking his head. "I can barely remember her. Wasn't really my type, strictly a one-night stand. She was from somewhere upstate, right?"

"What's the difference?" Bruce said coldly. "She was just another slut."

"I don't remember her that way," I said. "T.J. was a hick, a country kid trying too hard to fit in. Kind of sad, really."

"Not as sad as we might be," Roger countered. "How many names are on the list?"

"Five. The four of us and Freddy Murphy. Murph's in Chicago now, and he seems unlikely anyway. He always was a skinny little runt and this kid is big."

"Almost as big as you, Bruce," Johnny jibed.

"This isn't funny, guys," Roger said. "We could have a problem here. Do you know if T.J. was married when this kid was born, Sam? Or if he was ever legally adopted?"

"I don't know, why?"

"Because if he's technically illegitimate, he can sue for back child support. Maybe twenty years' worth."

"You're kidding," Bruce said. "Can he win?"

"In a California court? Who knows? But I don't like the odds much."

"He says he doesn't want anything from us."

"And you believe him?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "He's carrying a pretty big chip on his shoulder, but hell, in the past few months he's lost his father, his mother, and had his face rearranged. He's entitled to a few chips."

"It doesn't entitle him to cash in by breaking one of us," Roger said. "I've already got a family, thank you very much. Between

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braces, tuition, and ballet lessons I'm so far in the hole I won't see sunshine till I'm seventy."

"If Patti hears about this kid, I'm dead meat," Bruce groaned. "We're already seeing a marriage counselor and she's dredging up every stupid thing I ever did. A stray bastard showing up on my doorstep will just about finish us off. Patti will get the dealership, the house, and the kids. I'll end up sleeping under a goddamn bridge."

"You can always move in with Tiffany," Johnny said.

Bruce stared at him.

"What, you think it's a big secret that you're paying your girlfriend's rent?"

"But how did—?"

"I own a saloon, Bruce, and you're a local TV star. People talk."

"People should mind their own damn business and so should you. Maybe this place wouldn't bleed so much red ink."

"Right now this scar-face marine's our business," Roger reminded us. "But maybe I know a way to handle him."

"What way?" Bruce demanded.

"I know some people." Roger shrugged. "People who could have a serious talk with this kid. Make him go away. Wouldn't cost much. For a few hundred we could—"

"This is your big solution?" I asked. "Hire some goons to rough him up? Are you out of your freaking mind?"

"Easy for you to say, Sam," Bruce snapped. "Since Norma left, you don't have a helluva lot to lose."

"Besides, Scarface has already seen you and he's still looking," Johnny pointed out. "Which means you're off the hook, right, Sammy? Is that how it is?"

"I'll tell you how it is," I said, rising. "This kid came here looking for his father. Maybe it's one of us, maybe it's Freddy Murphy, I don't know. But I do know if anything bad happens to him, like one of Roger's sleazeball clients roughing him up, I'll bust all three of you for it, swear to God."

"On what charge, Officer?" Roger asked mildly. "Drinking a few beers with old buddies?"

"Look, Sam, you're upset, we all are," Bruce said, "but Johnny's right, you're out of this now. Thanks for warning us, pal, but maybe you'd better slide on out of here. Let us figure things out on our own."

"Promise me you won't do anything stupid, Bruce."

"I don't know what we're gonna do, and you don't wanna know. Walk away, Sam. It's better for you, better for us."

I glanced at the others but they avoided my eyes. Which was answer enough. "All right, if that's the way you want it. But you guys remember what I said. If there's any trouble, it's on you. As

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far as I'm concerned, auld lang syne is over. No passes on this. Understand?"

"Absolutely," Roger said, raising his glass in a toast. "Merry Christmas. Old pal."

"Screw yourself, Vanetti," I said. "Screw all of you."

Steaming, I drove back to the station. One advantage of having no life, working overtime isn't a chore. It passes the hours and pays time and a half.

I manned the dispatch desk till nine, monitoring the radio and assigning prowl cars and EMT units to the 911 calls. Nothing heavy came down: a few fender benders, a mugging, bar fight in a Southside parking lot. Typical Friday.

Between emergencies I called motels, trying to track down the marine. No luck.

At nine, Jake Cohen relieved me. I clocked out and walked home, beat and brooding. Hit the rack, too wired to sleep. Just as well. My beeper promptly went off. I called in, got Jake.

"Sorry to wake you, L.T., but I took a call and remembered seeing the name on your visitor's list. Elijah Smith?"

"Yeah, a marine. What about him?"

"Somebody ran his car off the road. Kicked the crap out of him. Thought you might want to know."

Damn.

"Where is he?"

Emergency room, Saint Mary's Hospital, rocking into a happy holiday weekend. Every bed full, extra gurneys in the corridors, walking wounded in the waiting room. I found the marine in a curtained cubicle, an Indian intern wrapping his arm. Elijah looked bad before. Worse now.

"What's the damage?" I asked the intern.

"Multiple contusions, two cracked ribs, facial lacerations, dislocated left shoulder, possible concussion. I reset the shoulder, patched up the rest. None of the injuries are life threatening, but concussions can be tricky. We really should keep him overnight for observation—"

"No freakin' way," Elijah growled, speech slurred by his swollen jaw.

"—but we can't hold him against his will." The intern shrugged. "I'll be done here in a minute."

"What the hell happened?" I asked Elijah.

"You know what happened, you son of a bitch!"

"No, I truly don't. Tell me."

"Car ran me off the road," he said, his eyes locked on mine. Furious. "Two guys get out, apologizing all over the place. I kneel down

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to check the damage, one of 'em clips me with a blackjack. I hit the deck, they put the boots to me."

"What did they look like?"

"Mid twenties, big, maybe one was Mexican. It was dark, snowing, they were wearing hats, heavy coats. I can't identify them, if that's what you're worried about."

"Whoa up, you think I'm involved with this?"

"Damned right I do. I talk to you, you ask me to back off. Then I get stomped by two guys who give me the same damn message. Either you set this up, or you know who did."

"I swear I had nothing to do with this, but you're right, I may know who did. I want you to go back to your motel now and—"

"No offense, pal, but I'm not taking orders from you. I didn't come here looking for trouble, but I'm up for it. Those clowns got over on me because I wasn't ready for 'em. Now I am. Anybody else comes at me, you can visit them in the hospital. Or maybe the morgue."

"You're going on with this?"

"Damn straight I am. I came here to find a man and have a conversation. Now we'll have more to talk about, that's all. Who's the big man?"

"What big man?"

"That's the last thing they said to me. Leave the big man alone. Kicking me while they said it. You know who they meant, right?"

"Probably," I admitted.

"But you're not going to tell me, are you?"

"This is a police matter now, Elijah. You've got to let me handle it."

"Hey, why not?" he said, wincing as the intern swabbed a gash on his jaw. "So far you're doing a terrific job."

Graceland Estates. Single-family manors with lawns long enough for polo, five-car garages. I tried to remember if I'd been to this particular home. Bruce moves every three or four years, stepping up to bigger, fancier places.

My wife and I always got invitations to the Fourth of July party, Thanksgiving, Christmas, whatever. Johnny would be playing piano and sometimes Roger would be there, but I wouldn't know anyone else and Bruce was usually too sloshed for coherent conversation. I'd rather watch paint dry.

Norma insisted on going, though. Liked making nice with wealthy people, hoping some of their success might rub off. It doesn't.

Afterward, she'd gripe for weeks, comparing our miserable lives to theirs, our crummy apartment versus Bruce's newest mansion, et cetera, blah, blah, blah. Why not just buy a hotel? I figured Bruce, Patti, and the two girls averaged about five and a half rooms apiece. How many could they live in at any given time? A library? A sewing room? Patti didn't sew, Bruce only read balance

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sheets and the sports page. Gimme a break.

Eventually she gave us both a break. She left.

After the divorce I went to one or two more parties at the Drummonds. Felt lost. Forgotten. Wandering amid strangers like my own ghost. As I pulled into the long, curving drive, that feeling came back. Only stronger.

This time I was the Ghost of Christmas Past. Haunting a lovely home decorated with strings of glittering lights, snow-dusted wreaths in the windows, neon reindeer on the roof.

And me, darkening the doorway like an echo of earlier times, when we were kids or young-marrieds with our lives ahead of us. And we were still friends.

Patti answered the door, wearing gossamer hostess pajamas and a welcoming smile. It faded when she saw me.

"Hey, Sam. Is something—"

"I need to see Bruce, Patti. Right now. Is he here?"

"Here? Of course not, he's supposed to be with you. He told me you guys were playing poker tonight."

"We were . . . together earlier. I really need to see him, Patti. Are you sure—?"

"Sam, I've had people here all evening. Bruce hasn't come home. You're his big buddy, I imagine you know where to look for him these days. Now if there's nothing else, I really should get back to my guests. And if you do happen to see my husband, tell him—never mind, I'll tell him myself."

And she closed the door. In my face. Didn't slam it, exactly, but the icy snick of the lock had the same effect.

Bruce wasn't here. He was with his girlfriend. And Patti assumed I knew all about it. That I'd been covering for him. I wondered how many other nights Bruce and I had been playing alibi poker.

I drove back to town, angry now, with lights and sirens howling like the hounds of hell. Screeched to a halt in front of John Law's, leaving the prowl car's strobes flashing.

Johnny was at the piano bar, noodling a Beatles tune for a circle of admirers. He froze in mid phrase when he saw me, then picked up the melody where he left off.

"Hey, Sam, I thought—"

"I need to know where Bruce is, Johnny."

"Playing poker with us." Johnny smiled. "I think it's your deal."

"I can deal you a world of trouble if you jack me around, Johnny. Now where the hell is he?"

"Could you excuse us, please, ladies?" Johnny said smoothly, shooing away his flock of sparrows. "Hey, Sam, lighten up, this is me, remember? Big Bruce is at his girlfriend's, I expect. Young chick, secretary at his dealership. Keeps her in a condo at Chesterfield Place. What's wrong?"

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"What do you think? Somebody kicked the hell out of our Christmas visitor. But then, you already knew that, didn't you?"

"Not me," Johnny said mildly, shaking his head. "I backed out of that little conference right after you left. Too heavy."

"Why? You've got as much to lose as any of us."

"You've gotta be kidding. You know me, Sam, I'm a piano player, not a businessman. Easy come, easy go. This place barely breaks even and it's mortgaged to the hilt. If it turns out the kid's related to me, I'll buy him a drink on his lousy luck, send him on his way."

"Your own son?"

"You can pick your friends, pal, but fate deals your relatives to you like a poker hand. Keep the ones you need, discard the rest. If the kid is Bruce's boy, he hits the lotto. Roger's worth a fair chunk of change, too, no matter what he says. But if the marine belongs to you or me? So sorry, sonny, you drew a busted flush. Better luck next life. If he's kin to Fred Murphy, who knows? How's ol' Murph doing these days?"

"I don't know, his number's disconnected. I put in a query with Cook County, haven't heard back yet. What nonsense did Bruce and Roger cook up?"

"I really couldn't say."

"You'd better say, Johnny, unless you want to hang with them."

"Do what you have to, old buddy, but when Bruce and Roger started babbling about renting some muscle, it was more than I wanted to know. I took a long walk and when I came back they were gone. I've been here since, ask anybody."

"I will."

"Jeez, you weren't kidding about no more auld lang syne, were you? Look, I'll cover for a buddy once in a while same as you, but—"

"I'm done covering for buddies."

"Yeah? So what did you tell Patti when she asked about Bruce's new squeeze?"

"She didn't ask, but it doesn't matter. I think she knows anyway."

"Not from me. Unlike you, I still value my old friends. Some of them, anyway. Now if you don't mind, I'd better glad-hand some customers. How about a tune for you, Sam? 'Hit The Road, Jack'? Or maybe 'Auld Lang Syne'?"

I left him alone at the piano. He wouldn't be lonely long. Hopeful divorcées were already circling as I stormed out.

Into a storm. The wind was picking up, snow falling more heavily now, swirling and drifting. A good half-inch had powdered the streets in the few minutes I'd been in John Law's.

Chesterfield Place is a high-rise condo complex just west of the business district. Forty units in a horseshoe configuration, its own gym, indoor and outdoor pools, all within easy walking distance of downtown, a perfect nest for young professionals. Busy people. The

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kind who won't notice a fading, middle-aged jock stopping by to boff his twenty-something secretary.

I thought Bruce would already be heading home to establish an alibi, but his car was still here. Hard to miss. A gleaming silver retro-Thunderbird sportster with a portholed hardtop. A silly car for a family man, but guys can go a little goofy after forty. Or any other time, for that matter.

The car had been here awhile, snow on the roof. Blocking it in with my prowl car, I climbed out and headed for the building's entrance. Halfway across the lot, something registered. A shape. In the shadows beside the Thunderbird.

And I didn't want it to be true but I knew it was, even as I sprinted back to Bruce's car. A body, crumpled on the pavement, huddled in a fetal position, already partly concealed with snow.

Elijah?

No. It was Bruce. No need to check for a pulse. His eyes were open, snowmelt clinging to his lashes. Like tears. A red blood line trickled from the corner of his mouth, pooling in the snow dust.

I knew better than to touch the body before the State Police CSI team checked over the corpse. The hell with it. I had to know.

Kneeling beside the body, I gently grasped Bruce's shoulder, as though trying to nudge him awake. Then I raised him just enough to see the wound. A hole in his chest. Gunshot. Looked like a small caliber, a black ring of powder residue around it.

The wound seemed much too tiny to destroy a guy like Bruce. He was too big, too strong, too . . . My eyes were stinging. Couldn't see anything clearly. Dammit.

Easing him carefully back to the ground, I fought off the urge to cover him with my coat. To protect him.

Instead I trotted to my prowl car, called in the homicide, asked for a CSI team. And put out an all-points pickup for Lance Corporal Elijah Smith, USMC.

Then I walked back and knelt beside the Thunderbird, to wait in the shadows with my friend.

I spent most of an hour at the Chesterfield lot, gave a statement to Vic Harlan, the detective who caught the case, then hovered around the T-bird watching the State Police Crime Scene Investigation team do their work, driving them nuts with questions.

It didn't take long. There simply wasn't much to find. No tracks in the snow but mine, no shell casing near the body. The CSI labs can work miracles with clothing fibers and powder residue but that can take weeks.

I didn't have weeks. This trouble had been twenty years in coming. I wasn't clear on what had happened or why. But I damn sure knew who brought it on.

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Two in the morning, graveyard shift. The station was nearly deserted, every available officer on road patrol as the bars began to close, loosing small armies of woozy boozers into the streets. And into their cars.

Jake Cohen was still manning the front desk. Old-timer, a year from retirement. Seen it all. Told me Elijah Smith was in custody, in holding cell seven. Picked up at a motel. No trouble. On the books, Smith was being held for questioning. For now.

Cohen handed me a message slip from Cook County, Illinois. A reply to my inquiry about Fred Murphy. It should have been edged in black. Fredrick Mahon Murphy, age 43, deceased, August 11th, this year. No further information available at this time. Will fax a copy of his death certificate at start of business hours, tomorrow, CST.

The slip didn't note the cause of death, but there's nothing natural about guys dying at forty-three. Especially not two of them on the same list. At this rate I'd run out of old friends by Christmas.

"Give me the key to seven, Jake. I want to talk to Smith."

"Wasn't Drummond a buddy of yours?" Cohen asked without looking up.

"That's right, and I know it's Harlan's case but I also know this kid. He might talk to me."

"Harlan's still at the scene canvassing for witnesses and it's a big building. It'll probably take him awhile. You want the video cam turned off?"

"No. It won't be like that. I just want to talk to him."

"If you say so." He handed me the key. And then he did look up, deliberately. And met my eyes. "Keep the noise down, okay?"

Holding cell. Six-by-eight concrete box painted institutional gray. Heavy oaken door, Plexiglas view slot. Cot against one wall, toilet in the corner. Recessed fluorescent light overhead, shielded behind a stainless-steel grate.

Elijah Smith, USMC, was resting on the cot, fingertips laced behind his head. Eyes wide open. Sat up when I opened the door.

Still wearing his uniform slacks and a T-shirt. Gray felt jailhouse slippers. No laces. Between the tape job from the hospital and his original bandages, he looked like a mummy's curse.

"You won't get away with this," he said. "Making inquiries isn't illegal. I'll have a Marine Corps lawyer down here in the morning and—"

"Bruce Drummond's dead," I said, cutting him off.

"What?"

"You heard me. Bruce. My friend, the man who may have been your biological dad, was shot to death in a parking lot a few hours ago."

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"Jesus! What—? Wait a minute, you don't think *I* did it?"

"You show up looking for him, a day later he's dead. Do the math."

"Hey, I never even met the guy."

"But you knew who he was. The big man. The one those two goons warned you away from when they roughed you up."

"Drummond sent them?"

"With a little help from his friends. Where did you go after you left the emergency room?"

"Back to my motel. Felt like crap. Still do."

"Angry, were you?"

"Hell yes! I've got a right to be. Nice town you've got. Ask a few questions and you get jacked around and stomped. Sure I was mad. But I didn't go after Drummond. I went to bed."

"Alone?"

"Of course. With this face I'm not exactly a chick magnet."

"No, you're not. Which is one more reason to be angry at the world in general and maybe Bruce in particular. So maybe you cruised over to Chesterfield Place. You had words with Bruce, things got out of hand. Bruce had been drinking and he's always been a mean drunk. If he jumped you—"

"Never happened. For openers, I've got no idea where this Chesterfield Place is. I just got here, remember? I had no reason to harm Mr. Drummond and I didn't."

"You came here looking for him."

"Wrong. I came with a list. He was just a name to me. So were you."

"But you intended to meet Bruce. And have a conversation. An unpleasant one, you said."

"How it went would be up to him. Maybe Drummond was the guy, maybe not. I never got that far."

"How about Fred Murphy? Have you met him?"

"Murphy? No, he's in Chicago. If things don't work out here I'll see him on my way back."

"You're sure you weren't there earlier this year? Say, in August?"

"I didn't know about any of this in August, I told you that. Why are you asking about Murphy?"

"Because Murph's dead, too. Last August."

He glanced up sharply, reading my face. "How?"

"I don't know. I thought you might."

"Me? Why would I know?"

"His name's on your list. Two down, three to go? Something like that?"

"It's nothing like that. Do you know if Murphy's father is alive?"

"His father? No, Murph's dad died when we were in college. Why?"

"Do you know how he died?"

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"Not really. He was sick and he died, that's all I remember. What's the difference?"

"Damn," he said softly, shaking his head. "Twenty years Twenty freakin' years and I probably missed him by a few months."

"What are you talking about?"

"That conversation I wanted? The unpleasant one? It wasn't a threat. It was a warning. After my accident the docs at Twenty-nine Palms ran a lot of tests on me. Turned up a genetic kidney problem called PKD. No history of it in my mom's family, so I must have inherited it from my father."

"So?"

"The thing is, PKD is treatable if you know about it ahead of time, but the symptoms don't show up until you hit forty or so. By then, it's usually too late. That's why I'm trying to find my biological father."

"To warn him?"

"I figure I owe him that much. Hell, I'd owe a stranger that much. And maybe, deep down, I hoped something might come of it. . . ."

"Like what?"

"Hell, I don't know! Anything! I've lost the only people I cared about, had my damn face rearranged! I thought if I could find the guy on my list, maybe he'd—" He broke off, swallowing. Hard. His mouth a tight line. When he spoke again his tone was dead level. And cold. His eyes met mine without wavering.

"I don't know what I thought. I was mixed up, probably just felt sorry for myself. Maybe coming here was a mistake. But I had nothing against Drummond or any of you. If I wanted to hurt anybody on my list, I wouldn't be here at all. I'd be back at Twenty-nine Palms, watching the papers, waiting for the right name to pop up in the obituaries."

We eyed each other in silence, across a gulf of years and experience. And loss. Taking stock. Smith was a tough kid, the marines don't make any other kind. But he was also nineteen years old. And a long, long way from home.

"I'll need to confirm all this," I said. But it was an automatic response. I knew it would check out. Gut instinct. I'd only known Elijah Smith a day but, bone deep, I sensed he was an honest man. He was telling me the truth.

Damn it to hell.

Because that meant someone I'd known a lot longer was lying.

That's the trouble with old friends. Sometimes you know them too well.

John Law's was closed when I pulled up, but I could see light inside, someone moving round. I rapped on the door. Johnny

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answered, wearing an apron, holding a broom.

"You're a little late for last call, Sam."

"I know. We need to talk."

"Sure, c'mon in. Want a beer?"

"That'd be illegal. Make it a Coors."

"I'll make it two." He went behind the bar, drew two drafts with a flourish, passed one to me. Tinked my glass lightly with his. "Merry Christmas."

"For us, maybe," I said. "Not for Bruce."

"No. Not for Bruce. I heard about it earlier. Helluva thing."

"Not for Fred Murphy, either, Johnny. He died back in August."

"You're kidding. Murph? Damn. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. Most likely a kidney problem, a genetic thing."

"Damn," he repeated softly, "we're dropping like flies, Sam. What's going on?"

"Time, mostly. It's twenty years since school, Johnny. A long time. When one of us falls, nobody says, 'Gee, he was so young.' Not anymore. Tell me about Bruce. What happened with you two?"

"You know what happened. You were here."

"I mean afterward. In the parking lot at Chesterfield Place."

"I wasn't there, but I heard that marine killed him. Heard you guys already arrested him."

"We did, but we're cutting him loose."

"You're letting him go? Why, for God's sake?"

"Because he didn't do it, Johnny."

"What are you talking about? Of course he did. The kid blew into town looking for trouble and found it with Bruce."

"But that's also part of the problem. He only arrived yesterday morning. There's no way he could know about Bruce's squeeze at the Chesterfield. Hell, I didn't even know about her. Besides, the kid has no motive."

"Sure he does. His mom dies, he's angry about being abandoned. Any shrink would have a field day with that. You said yourself the kid's got a chip on his shoulder. What happened to Bruce can't be just a coincidence."

"It's not. I think the guy who killed Bruce expected the marine to be blamed for it. And that's a problem, too. Because if the marine's out of the picture, it only leaves the guys who knew why he came. And that's a short list, Johnny. Bruce and Murph are dead, scratch them. Roger had no motive, nor do I. Which leaves you."

"That's crazy! We're all friends! What reason would I have?"

"We're sitting in it. Bruce put up the money for this place and he's been floating you ever since. But his marriage was breaking up over his womanizing. Patti was sure to walk away with at least half of everything. Bruce couldn't afford you anymore."

"But killing him wouldn't help."

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"Sure it would. Your partnership insurance transfers title to the survivor, pays all debts, and kicks in a half-million to boot. You're sole owner, in fat city. Or thought you were."

He stared at me in disbelief. "I don't understand. How the hell do you know about the insurance?"

"I guessed Roger drew up the papers, so I asked."

"But . . . that's privileged information! He had no right to tell you!"

"He knows that. He told me anyway. We're all friends, remember? And that's the part I don't understand. You didn't know the marine was coming, so you couldn't have planned this ahead of time. What happened with you two?"

"God," he said softly, shaking his head. "After you left, Bruce and Roger hatched this cockamamie scheme to run the kid off. Or buy him off. Ten freakin' grand just to make him go away. Half of that would save my business. I didn't want to ask Bruce with Roger around so I followed him to the Chesterfield, begged him for a loan, just enough to tide me over. Big mistake. You know how crazy he gets when he's drinking. Blew me off, called me a leech, took a swing at me. I thought he was going to kill me."

"So you had to shoot him in self-defense? That's what you're telling me?"

"That's how it was! You know what he was like!"

"Yeah, I do. I also know what you're like, Johnny. I've never known you to own a gun, much less carry one. So why were you packing iron when you followed Bruce to that parking lot? Unless you planned to use it."

"Screw you, Sam. I'm through talking to you. I want a lawyer."

"Good idea. You'll need one. But I wouldn't call Roger if I were you."

"So what happens now? Are you going to arrest me?"

"Can't. It's not my case and I'm personally involved. Vic Harlan will be along in a few minutes."

"Look, is there any way you can help me out here, Sam? I mean, we've been friends twenty years. That must count for something."

"We do go back a ways, that's true. But I'm not sure we're friends, Johnny. Not anymore. We're more like drinking buddies with a history. Know each other's jokes and wives and weaknesses. But the truth is, if you could do a thing like this, I never really knew you at all. I can offer you some friendly advice, though. Shut your mouth. Because if you say one more freakin' word to me about friendship, I'll put you in the hospital, swear to God. Old buddy."

Ten A.M., Coronado Motel, second floor. I knocked.

"It's open."

I stepped in. Suitcase open on the bed, already packed. Elijah

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Smith came out of the bathroom wearing his full-dress uniform, carrying his shaving kit. Stopped when he saw me.

"It's you. Thought it was the porter."

"You're leaving?"

"Hell yes. The sooner the better. Was there something you wanted?"

"I just stopped by to tell you we busted the guy who did Bruce."

"Good for you. Is that it?" He tossed the shaving kit in his suitcase.

"Not quite. Cook County faxed me a copy of Fred Murphy's death certificate this morning. He died of renal failure. PKD."

For a moment, he didn't react. Absorbing the death of a father he'd never met. And never would.

Then he slowly zipped his suitcase closed. And turned to face me. His battered face showed no emotion at all.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Lance Corporal. And for the way you were treated here."

"It's not such a big deal. I never even met the guy. Maybe it's better this way. As for the rest of it, I figure most of that's on me. Came stomping in here like Marley's ghost, looking for the wrong man. Sorry if I caused you trouble. It wasn't my intention."

"The trouble was already here, you just set it off. None of this was your fault."

"Glad to hear it. Anything else?"

"Nope, that's it. Except for maybe one thing. Have you got heavy plans for Christmas?"

"Christmas? Not really. Hang around the barracks, I guess. I'm scheduled for surgery on the twenty-seventh. Why?"

"Maybe you could stay on a few days, take in the sights. Saginaw's a pretty town, especially this time of year. And I can promise you a helluva Christmas dinner."

"Why?"

"Gee, I don't know. Maybe I like your sunny disposition."

He winced. Which was probably as close to a smile as he could get. "Sorry. I'm not always this bitchy, Lieutenant. Been a rough year. But you don't owe me, you know. Not a damned thing."

"You came a long way to do a right thing, waded through a ton of trouble and handled it. I admire that. A lot. And for what it's worth, that list of yours? I'm kinda sorry I'm not the guy you came here to find."

He eyed me for a moment with that Frankenstein stare. Like the Ghost of Christmas Past. Then he nodded slowly.

"Who knows?" he said. "Maybe you are." ●

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THE MYNA BIRDS

by Ellery Queen

Friends of the feathered world will have no trouble recalling the case of old Mrs. Andrus, who left a million dollars to thirty-eight myna birds. What is not generally known, even among bird lovers, is that Ellery was in that case up to his pectorals, taking wing on as pretty a flight of reasoning as his casebook attests.

With the assistance, be it noted, of the only bird-detective on record.

Mrs. Andrus was a lonely old lady who had outlived family and friends, and whom an aging body had condemned to a wheelchair. Her only human connections were her doctor, her lawyer, and her paid companion. But Dr. Cooke was a bloated man with a sort of decad charm, like an overripe banana; Attorney De Rose, whom the doctor had recommended to manage Mrs. Andrus's affairs when she became too infirm to manage them herself, was a sporty fellow with a perpetual tan and a voice that hurt the old lady's ears; and her companion, Miss Baggott, also introduced by Dr. Cooke, was a frozen-faced female of doubtful gentility whom Mrs. Andrus tolerated only because the woman tended the birds devotedly. And so the mynas, which had begun as a hobby, became the reason for what was left of the old lady's life.

They were true talking mynas from southern India—pert, hoppy little creatures amusingly yellow-wattled, with iridescent black wings and bass voices. Some of them had vocabularies of almost a hundred words. Mrs. Andrus found them a great comfort—far more satisfactory companions, she thought, than Miss Baggott. Her dependents, she called them; and, quite as if they were, the old lady worried over their fate when she should be gone.

From this it was a logical step to securing their future. Mrs. Andrus directed Attorney De Rose immediately to place the bulk of her property into a fund earmarked for her birds' support, mainte-

The Ellery Queen stories and novels are classics of American detective fiction, and as you'll see from this issue's Passport to Crime story, they've inspired that "sincerest form of flattery," imitation, all the way across the world. This original case, from the 1950s, contains a brilliant puzzle, colorful characters, and elegant prose—hallmarks of all the work signed "Ellery Queen."

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nance, and loving care. Mr. De Rose and Dr. Cooke consented to administer the fund, and Miss Baggott was specified as permanent curator. When the last myna should have passed away, the fund was to be administered for the benefit of designated charities.

In the interim, Mrs. Andrus asked little for herself. The attorney paid her bills, she and the mynas were company for each other, and she was content.

Her pets' one failing, Mrs. Andrus sometimes felt, was their inability to play contract bridge, the only other interest of her declining years. For this diversion she had to depend on Dr. Cooke and Mr. De Rose, with Miss Baggott making the fourth. On such evenings as the gentlemen could spare for her entertainment, the old lady would be ensconced in her wheelchair at the bridge table, playing a remarkably shrewd game for a tenth of a cent a point. Her bridge nights completed her happiness.

But on the last night of her life, Mrs. Andrus was not happy. Her usually pleasant face, as she wheeled herself into her living room, was positively menacing. Miss Baggott, who had set up the bridge table and chairs, glanced quickly at the physician and the lawyer.

"Nothing wrong, I hope, Mrs. Andrus?" asked Dr. Cooke genially, waving his cigar. "We're not feeling that nasty pain again tonight, are we?"

"It's nothing a grand slam won't cure—eh, Mrs. Andrus?" roared De Rose. "Well, well, the usual partners?"

"The game," said Mrs. Andrus, not stirring from her doorway, "is over." Behind her, in the bedroom, thirty-eight pairs of unwinking eyes looked on attentively.

"Over?" Miss Baggott half rose.

Hello, funnyface! said a bass voice suddenly from somewhere behind Mrs. Andrus.

"Hush, Minnie," said the old lady, without turning. "You thought I was asleep at my naptime today, Miss Baggott, but you were quite mistaken. I overheard what you said on the phone to Mr. De Rose and Dr. Cooke. Don't you trust your confederates, Miss Baggott? Or have they been cheating their own kind, too?"

"Confederates? Cheating?" said Attorney De Rose heartily.

"I'm sure I don't know what you think you overheard, Mrs. Andrus—" began Dr. Cooke with a smile.

"I overheard enough, Doctor, to realize why you brought Mr. De Rose and Miss Baggott into my life. I'm being systematically robbed by the three of you. I've been an old fool, but not anymore! First," said the old lady in the same hard voice, "you're to put back what you've taken. You have ten minutes to give me an accounting of the stolen funds."

"Ten minutes?" said the doctor incredulously.

"Ten minutes, Dr. Cooke. Then we'll go on from there."

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Say ah! said another bass voice.

Mrs. Andrus backed her wheelchair swiftly into her bedroom and slammed the door. The three at the card table were silent for some time. Then Dr. Cooke said pleasantly, "Well, Baggie, you messed it up. Suppose you fix it."

"That's right, blame me," shrilled Miss Baggott. "I warned you two not to be so greedy—to wait till she kicked off! Put the money back. Maybe she won't prosecute—"

"Academic," murmured the doctor. "The bookies have my share. And from the way you've been painting the town, De Rose, I gather you're in the same stable. Any suggestions from our legal department?"

The lawyer extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray before him with a brutal thumb; under his tan, he was livid. "The way I'd fixed it, we could have gone on working this gold mine for years. Who'd squawk—the birds?"

"There's an old bird in that bedroom who's going to squawk. To the D.A.!" said Miss Baggott venomously.

"And suppose she doesn't."

"What?"

"Suppose she doesn't," said the lawyer, squeezing the deck of cards. "Suppose tonight we had to cut our bridge game short because, say, Miss Baggott wasn't feeling well. And suppose Dr. Cooke gave her some sleeping pills, and Miss Baggott retired to her room and went out like a light, and the doctor and Mr. De Rose left. And suppose, as soon as they were gone, that slippery apartment burglar who's been working the West Side lately broke in here. And suppose," said the lawyer, looking up at them, "suppose the old woman surprised him and he lost his stupid head. And suppose, since he's known to carry a knife—"

"No," whispered Miss Baggott. "No."

"Yes," mocked the lawyer. "Unless you want to go to jail for ten years. I don't. Do you, Doctor?"

"Your diagnosis," said Dr. Cooke slowly, "convinces me." Then he said quickly, "Let's agree on the *modus operandi* before she comes back. . . ."

Ellery and Inspector Queen broke into the Andrus apartment thirty-five seconds too late. Ellery stopped in the living room to bend over the still-bleeding body in the wheelchair while his father, pistol drawn, kicked open the bedroom door to be buffeted by a storm of black wings and bass bird cries. But the inspector beat his way through in time to catch Dr. Cooke, Attorney De Rose, and Miss Baggott all trying to pile through the same window to get to the fire escape.

The interruption had come so suddenly on the heels of the mur-

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der that, while the knife had been wiped clean, there had been no time even to replace it in the kitchen drawer.

Later, when the assistant medical examiner wheeled the frail corpse into the bedroom for his examination, the myna birds swooped and hopped and chattered about the closed door as if they knew what had happened.

Cut! boomed one bird, a particularly large fellow. *Cut, cut!*

"Yes, Blackie, yes." Ellery picked him up and, stroking his throat feathers, faced the pale manacled trio with cold anger. "Whatever phony plan you animals had in mind, it was doomed to failure before it was even hatched. Mrs. Andrus phoned me early this evening after sending Miss Baggott out on an errand. She told me all about what she'd found out today, and about calling you three together for a showdown tonight. I warned her not to show her hand till we got here, but apparently she was too outraged to wait. And you killed her."

Cut! said the myna bird again.

"Correction noted, birdie," rasped Inspector Queen. "Which one of you did the actual cutting?"

"You've got us all wrong, gentlemen." De Rose's lips were stiff. "The doctor and I arrived late, and Miss Baggott was just coming back from a walk. We all saw a masked man duck out the window. Then you pounded on the door, and we panicked—"

"You don't say, Counselor!"

"There must be some way of telling," mumbled Ellery, walking over to the bridge table. "They came here tonight ostensibly for a bridge game—"

"Hold it, son." The assistant medical examiner was coming out of the bedroom. "Well, Prouty?"

"Four knife wounds, left chest." Dr. Prouty examined the silent trio with the enthusiasm of a funeral director. "No one wound sufficient to cause instant death, but at her age and condition they were cumulatively fatal. . . . What did he say?"

Cut, cut, cut! the big myna was squawking. He struggled, and Ellery let him go. The bird hopped onto the bridge table and began vindictively to peck at a card. After a moment he lost interest and flew off.

"He said 'Cut,' " said Dr. Prouty wonderingly. "Why, he must have been an eyewitness to the murder!" He went out, shaking his head.

"Thirty-eight eyewitnesses," said Ellery, gnawing a nail. "Maybe, Dad, we ought to question them."

"I'd almost settle for that," snapped the inspector. "Only, as it happens, even they weren't here."

"They weren't?" frowned Ellery.

"Not in the living room here, where she got it. I guess you didn't notice. They flew in from the bedroom when I kicked the door open

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and grabbed these lice. . . . What's the matter with *you?"*

"But if Blackie wasn't on the scene of the crime, why does he keep saying 'Cut'?"

"How should I know?" said the inspector, exasperated. "It's one of the words he's picked up. Look, son—"

"No, Dad, wait." Then Ellery said softly, "You're right. It's one of the words he picked up because Mrs. Andrus was so fond of bridge . . . she told me herself she played cards with these people regularly—*The cards!"*

And a few minutes later Ellery rose from one of the three chairs at the bridge table, and his voice made Dr. Cooke, Attorney De Rose, and Miss Baggott even paler. "At one point tonight you three sat in these chairs—Mrs. Andrus would have had to use her wheelchair. What were you doing? These cards tell the story. The closed deck in the middle of the table contains forty-nine cards. The three other cards are distributed about the table—one at each of your seats, faceup. The three of hearts. The king of spades. The nine of hearts."

"They cut the cards," said the inspector. "Butchers. Cutting to see which one was going to stick the old lady!"

"This card setup, which you had no time to put away," growled Ellery, "even tells us who drew what. From the cigars in your breast pocket and that cold cigar butt in the ashtray beside the spade king, Dr. Cooke, it was you who drew the king of spades. The cigarette butt in the tray beside the nine of hearts indicates your seat, De Rose, because if it had been smoked by this woman it would be tipped with her lipstick. So you, Miss Baggott, drew the heart three."

"Three, nine, king," rapped the inspector. "That does it!"

Ellery nodded. "It does indeed."

"It was the skunk who drew the king of spades, of course," said the inspector. *"You, Cooke."*

"No," said the doctor urgently.

"No," agreed Ellery. His father wheeled. "No one with medical training, Dad, would stab four times in the area of the heart and fail to hit a vital spot. Dr. Cooke would have finished her in one surgical stroke."

"But Cooke drew the high card," protested the inspector.

"Then they were cutting for loser, not winner," said Ellery. "So it wasn't the high card that drew the murder assignment, *it was the low card.* And since we know De Rose drew the heart nine and you the heart three," he said to the rigid woman, "that lays this miserable killing right in your lap, Miss Baggott."

The big myna made a sudden landing on Miss Baggott's head. She cowered, shrieking.

Down one! rumbled the bird.

"Now that, Blackie, is your first mistake," said Ellery. "Under the laws of this state, it's going to be . . . down three!" ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

AN URBAN LEGEND PUZZLE

by Norizuki Rintarō

Translated from the Japanese by Beth Cary

This co-winner of the 55th Mystery Writers of Japan Award in the short story category is an homage to Ellery Queen. The parallels include the father-son/police inspector-mystery writer detecting team and use of the writer-sleuth's name as byline (we've followed Japanese style in names throughout: i.e., surname first). The pseudonymous author belongs to the "new traditionalist" movement in Japanese mystery writing, in which puzzle construction is key. He has several novels and a story collection in print. ●

1.

"What would you think of a message that said, 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' This wasn't spoken, but a sentence written by hand."

"'. . . didn't turn on the light' . . . ?" Rintarō cocked his head. "I've heard that phrase somewhere. Is this a quiz or something?"

"No, it concerns a homicide I'm investigating. Late Monday night, a university student was stabbed to death in a one-room apartment in Matsubara, Setagaya Ward. Those words were inscribed in blood, in an unsteady hand, on the wall of the crime scene. Of course it was the victim's blood."

"Letters in blood on the wall of the crime scene?"

Inspector Norizuki nodded, his expression serious. It was a weekend night and he'd changed into his pajamas and was enjoying his after-dinner cigarette.

Rintarō shook his head. "Come on! You can't fool me that that's a case you're working on now. It's a famous urban legend."

"A famous what?"

"Urban legend. That's what sensational rumors that are spread

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by word of mouth are called. People claim that they're true stories heard from a friend of a friend. Some of these are standard occult or ghost stories, while others have their roots in celebrity scandals or strange cases involving vicious crimes. The story you've heard is one of the more popular ones, Father."

"Wait a second." Inspector Norizuki looked bewildered. "You've actually heard tell of such a case before this?"

"Yes, I have. And when you say 'actually,' I think you're just trying to pretend innocence because I've blown your cover."

"This isn't one of your novels, Rintarō. I wouldn't do something so roundabout. Tell me about this rumor."

"You're a harsh critic, Father. All right, then. The story I've heard goes like this:

Ms. A, a college student, went to a party at B's apartment with other members of her club. B was a year ahead of her at college. They had a good time drinking. A little after midnight, the party ended, and A left the apartment along with a friend.

After walking for a while, A realized that she had left her handbag at the apartment and decided to part with her friend and go back to retrieve her bag. When she returned to the apartment, the lights were already out and there was no response when she rang the doorbell. It appeared that B had already gone to bed. Feeling dejected, A tried turning the doorknob and it opened. B must have forgotten to lock the door.

The apartment's one room was pitch dark. But she remembered where she had left her bag and felt bad about waking the soundly sleeping B. Without turning on the light, A whispered, 'I came to pick up what I forgot,' as she groped for her bag. She left the apartment as she had entered it."

"Hmm, that's very interesting," Inspector Norizuki mused. The expression on his face was deadly serious, in contrast to the seeming nonchalance of the statement. Unaware that the lengthening ashes of his cigarette were about to drop onto the table, he asked, "And then?"

"The next day, A, concerned that she hadn't seen B on campus, went to his apartment. When she arrived, a police car was parked in front of the building, and the street was filled with policemen and onlookers.

'Did something happen here?' A asked one of the neighbors clustering around.

'There was a murder here last night. Mr. B in Apartment X was killed.'

It seemed that after A and the others had departed, someone had entered through the unlocked door and stabbed B to death as he was sleeping.

I should have woken him and told him to lock his door when I came

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back to retrieve my bag, A thought. She was filled with remorse, but no matter how much she regretted her actions, B would not return to life. Nothing could be done for him now.

Starting the next day, the club members who had been drinking with B just before he was killed were called in by the police to give their statements. Feeling somewhat responsible for B's death, A went voluntarily to give her statement to the detective in charge, offering as much detail as she could about the events of the night of the crime. When she'd finished, the detective took out a photograph. Prefacing his question by saying the picture might shock her, he asked, 'This message was left at the scene of the crime. Does it mean anything to you?'

The photograph was of the wall in B's apartment. Smeared on the wall in blood were these words:

'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?'

Upon seeing the photograph, A turned pale and fainted. When A had returned to B's room that night, he had already been killed! If she had turned on the light to try to wake B, she would have come face to face with the killer and A would most certainly also have been killed."

Inspector Norizuki folded his arms across his chest and groaned. "You said it was a popular urban legend. Does that mean quite a large percentage of young people have heard it?"

"I suppose so. Nowadays there are many sites on the Internet dealing with urban legends. Leaving aside whether one believes it to be a true story, it's likely most young people have come across it at least once. There was even a movie last year that dealt with a similar tale."

The inspector opened his eyes wide in wonder. "Even a movie?"

"An American film that was given the title *Rules* in Japan. The original title was *Urban Legend*. It was a horror-suspense B movie on the subject of urban legends—just as it says. It should be out now on video. The plot sounded interesting—a series of murders made to look like popular urban legends in America, like 'The Backseat Murderer,' 'The Boyfriend's Death,' or 'The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs'—but it wasn't really very good as a mystery movie. A different version of the story we've been talking about was used."

"By 'a different version' you mean . . . ?"

"It's a type known as 'The Roommate's Death.' And it might be closer to the original. The version we were just talking about didn't arise spontaneously. The core of the story must have been translated from an earlier American version. After all, the recent boom in urban legends started in America. What kicked it off was the book *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, written by the folklore scholar Jan Harold Brunvand, which came out in nineteen eighty-one."

The inspector snorted impatiently and said, "Quit showing off

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your knowledge. What was the version of the story in the movie *Rules*?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Rintarō apologized. "Details of 'The Roommate's Death' can vary, but in the movie, it goes like this. It's set in a dormitory of a college far from any major city. The heroine's roommate is a dissolute female college student. One night, she enters the room to hear moans from her roommate's bed. Assuming, mistakenly, that her roommate is in the midst of a tryst with her boyfriend, the heroine doesn't turn on the light, but goes directly to her own bed and falls asleep listening to music through her earphones. Waking up the next morning, she discovers her roommate's butchered body in the bed next to hers. On the wall, written in the blood of the victim, are the words, 'AREN'T YOU GLAD YOU DIDN'T TURN ON THE LIGHT?'"

"So again, by not turning on the light, she saved her own life. I see. It's a valuable piece of information. The fact that the film was shown in Japan means that it is possible the murderer may have seen it. If it's out on video, then we should check the video rental shops. If we're lucky, this could help us narrow down the suspects." Inspector Norizuki took out his pocket notebook and jotted down the movie title. He seemed to be serious.

Wondering if he could really be in earnest, Rintarō said, "This isn't just an after-dinner entertainment? Don't tell me that such a strange case has actually occurred?"

"Yes, it has, actually. I've been saying so from the beginning, haven't I? But it's not the movie version. This case is just like the first story of Ms. A that you related. We've kept the message written in blood from the media, so it hasn't become a news item."

Rintarō stared wide-eyed at his father. "A copycat murder of an urban legend?"

Frowning deeply, the inspector replied, "It seems like it, from what you have to say."

"Then, please," Rintarō said eagerly, "give me the details and circumstances of the case."

2.

"The victim, or student B," Inspector Norizuki explained, "is Matsunaga Toshiki, a second-year student in the Sciences Department at M—— University. He lived in Room 206 of the Belle Maison Matsubara apartment building at Matsubara 1-chōme. This is a building for students a five-minute walk from Meidaimae Station on the Keiō Line. The name of the building is fancy, but the one-room units are just one rank above low-end apartments. Apparently the soundproofing is thorough, but as the front entrance has no auto-lock system, anyone can freely enter the

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building, even those who do not live there. Matsunaga's body was found lying on the floor of his room on Tuesday afternoon."

"Who found it?"

"A deliveryman from Yamaneko Delivery Company. It just happened that on Monday, the day before, a package was sent from Matsunaga's family in Shizuoka. The deliveryman rang the doorbell for Room 206, but there was no response. Noticing that the door was unlocked, the deliveryman suspected that Matsunaga was actually there but pretending not to be. It does seem a waste of gasoline to go repeatedly to the same address to try to deliver a package to a student who might be sleeping in until the sun is high in the sky," the inspector said, seeming to sympathize with the deliveryman. "Just to make sure, he opened the door and peeked into the room to discover the victim lying in a pool of blood on the floor of the 8-tatami-mat-sized* room. In a panic, the deliveryman tried to raise him up, but it was obvious that hours had passed since the victim had died. It was one forty-five P.M. when he called the police emergency number, 110, from the scene on his cell phone."

"It is fortunate that he gave priority to contacting the police over fulfilling his delivery quotas. What was the method used in the crime and the cause of death?"

"Matsunaga died almost immediately from loss of blood, having been stabbed in the chest with a sharply pointed object like a pick. But it wasn't that he was suddenly attacked while he was asleep in his bed. There were signs that he struggled with the assailant. So we should take it that the victim woke up and resisted."

"You say 'a sharply pointed object like a pick.' Could it have been something like a screwdriver?"

"No, we discovered an ice pick left in the sink with blood on the tip that matched the victim's blood. We found out that this ice pick wasn't brought in from elsewhere. It was one that Matsunaga, who liked to drink, frequently used. As the handle had been washed clean with water, we couldn't lift any fingerprints that might have been those of the murderer. According to the Identification Section, the murderer must have washed off most of the victim's blood at the same time."

"I see. The fact that there were signs of struggle and that the ice pick from the crime scene was used seems to indicate that it was an unpremeditated crime. What about the estimated time of death?"

"According to the medical examiner and the results of the autopsy, Matsunaga was killed between eleven P.M. on Monday and one A.M. on Tuesday. But we ascertained from the statements taken from those associated with the victim that he was already

*140-odd square feet. Tatami mats are used for flooring. They are approximately 6′ by 3′. Japanese room measurements are often given in terms of them.

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dead by about eleven-thirty P.M."

"Whom do you mean by 'those associated with the victim'?" Rintarō cut in.

Inspector Norizuki did not respond right away; he appeared to want to tell his story at his own pace. Only after he had reached for a cigarette and taken his time lighting it did he continue.

"Those who were in the same club at the university, of course. I told you it was exactly like the story of Ms. A, didn't I? Matsunaga Toshiki was a member of the university Bowling Club. He often invited other members of the club to drinking parties in his apartment. The solid soundproofing had the advantage that even if they became drunk and boisterous, his neighbors would not complain."

"Hmm, and that's why Matsunaga had his own ice pick?"

"Right. Monday, when the crime occurred, was the last day of first-term exams at the university. The Bowling Club members had gathered early in the evening at a pub in Shimokitazawa to celebrate the end of their exams. When that initial party at the pub broke up, the seven members of the club who were an especially close group repaired, as usual, to Belle Maison Matsubara to continue to drink. They said they bought some drinks and snacks at a convenience store on the way and began the second party just after nine P.M."

"Who was at the second party?"

"Four male students, including Matsunaga, and three female students. Here's the list of them."

So saying, the inspector opened to a page in his notebook. The list noted each member's name, major department, university year, gender, and the train station closest to his or her residence.

Matsunaga Toshiki	Sciences Dept.	2nd year	male	(Meidaimae)
Nozaki Tetsu	Sciences Dept.	2nd year	male	(Machida)
Miyoshi Nobuhiko	Law Dept.	2nd year	male	(Yōga)
Nagashima Yurika	Literature Dept.	2nd year	female	(Kichijōji)
Endō Fumiaki	Economics Dept.	1st year	male	(Tsutsujigaoka)
Hirotani Aki	Literature Dept.	1st year	female	(Yoyogi Hachiman)
Sekiguchi Reiko	Economics Dept.	1st year	female	(Umegaoka)

"There are two first-year female students, aren't there? Which one played the part of Ms. A?" Rintarō asked as he attempted to commit the names on the list to memory.

"It was Hirotani Aki of the Literature Department. But let me tell you the facts in order. At first, the drinking party on Monday night was friendly and lively. But then it veers from your story. Partway through, there was quite a disagreement. Matsunaga and Miyoshi Nobuhiko, also a second-year student, started arguing

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over some small matter. Disregarding the efforts of the others to calm them down, they continued to revile each other."

"I thought you said it was a close-knit group? Did they dislike each other?"

"Apparently not normally. And though they insulted each other, they didn't actually come to blows. Matsunaga, who was the calmer of them, seemed to enjoy dishing out a string of insults that angered Miyoshi. Since he was drinking, Miyoshi must have overreacted to comments he would have let slide if he had been sober. Isn't that what student gatherings have always been like? Nevertheless, Miyoshi apparently did have a reason to dislike Matsunaga."

"Would that be related to this?" Rintarō extended his little finger, indicating girlfriend problems.*

The inspector made a sour face and nodded. "Exactly. What they call a love triangle."

"Did it involve one of the three women there?"

"No, that's not it. It all happened in the past. There was a girl named Sasaki Megumi who had been a member of the Bowling Club. She was in the same year as Matsunaga and Miyoshi and was going out with Miyoshi. Then Matsunaga seduced her. With the trouble that created among the threesome, it became uncomfortable for her and she stopped attending club gatherings. She dropped out of the club, and ultimately her relationship with Miyoshi fell apart."

"I see. It's the kind of story you hear quite often."

"Well, yes. There's a bit more to it, but for now let's go on with the case. The two young men started quarreling shortly after ten P.M. At ten-thirty, Miyoshi said he had drunk too much and didn't feel well, so he would go home. I don't think he was really drunk. He probably felt uncomfortable. No one attempted to keep him there, so he left alone."

"The party didn't break up when Miyoshi left?"

"Not right away," the inspector replied. "But a pall was cast over the party, and those who remained started squirming. For about half an hour they continued with some desultory conversation until they decided to break it up. Matsunaga, the host, had stayed up all night the night before to study for his exam that day, so apparently he was having a hard time keeping his eyes open by then."

"Then perhaps his taunting Miyoshi wasn't out of spite but partly to keep himself awake."

"I wonder about that. In any event, shortly after eleven P.M., after cleaning up the cigarette butts, empty bottles, and trash, the five remaining club members (other than Matsunaga) left Belle

*Raising the pinky while making a fist with the other fingers is a Japanese slang gesture for "woman." Raising a thumb is the corresponding gesture for "man."

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Maison Matsubara. They divided into two groups. Nozaki Tetsu and Nagashima Yurika, along with Endō Fumiaki, headed for Meidaimae Station. Hirotani Aki and Sekiguchi Reiko, the two first-year coeds, went in the opposite direction to Umegaoka Station on the Odakyū Odawara Line."

"Just a moment, Father." Rintarō broke in. ". . . I can understand why Nagashima Yurika, who lives in Kichijōji, and Endō Fumiaki, who was going to Tsutsujigaoka, would go to Meidaimae on the Keiō Line. But Nozaki Tetsu lives in Machida, doesn't he? Why didn't he go to Umegaoka Station on the Odakyū Line with the two first-year coeds?"

"That's because instead of going home to Machida, Nozaki went to spend the night at Yurika's apartment in Kichijōji," Inspector Norizuki said. "I should have explained earlier that Nozaki and Yurika were an accepted couple within the club. But Yurika asked me to keep this secret from her parents."

"So that's the deal. Sorry I keep interrupting your story. The point isn't that group but the two who headed for Umegaoka, isn't it?"

"Right you are." The inspector cleared his throat and wet his lips. It was his signal that the story was entering its key stage. "The distance from Belle Maison Matsubara to Umegaoka Station takes about fifteen minutes on foot. When the two women reached the station, Hirotani Aki noticed that she didn't have her cell phone with her. She had received a call during the party, had taken her phone out of her bag then, and had forgotten it in Matsunaga's room. If it had been a different item that she had left, it would not have mattered much. But she couldn't go home without her cell phone, which to her is more valuable than her life. Flustered, Aki decided to go back to Belle Maison Matsubara."

"Did she go alone?"

"That's right. Sekiguchi Reiko did not go with her."

"That's strange. Even though the trains were still running, it was late for a young woman of nineteen to be walking the dark streets alone. That's not safe. Why didn't Sekiguchi Reiko go along with her? Perhaps the two of them weren't such good friends after all?"

Inspector Norizuki shook his head. "No, Aki and Reiko were the best of friends even within the group. This is unmistakable. Your doubts are justified, but there was a valid reason why Aki returned to Matsunaga's apartment alone. Aki borrowed Reiko's bicycle."

"Her bicycle?"

"Yup. Reiko lives in an apartment at Umegaoka 2-chōme, south of Umegaoka Station. She rides her bicycle to the station, where she takes the train. That's why Reiko's bicycle was at the station's

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bicycle parking lot that day. A distance that takes fifteen minutes to walk one way can be covered in a ten-minute round trip by bicycle. It's practical, isn't it? Reiko handed her bicycle key to Aki and went to the late-night donut shop facing the station to wait for her."

"I see. This is more involved than the urban legend. What happened then?"

"Aki pedaled to Belle Maison Matsubara on the borrowed bicycle. The party had let out after eleven P.M., and they had taken fifteen minutes to walk to Umegaoka Station. Let's say it took a few minutes to arrange to borrow the bicycle and five minutes to bike to Matsunaga's apartment. Aki would have reached the door of Room 206 around eleven-thirty P.M. The highlight of the case starts here. Aki rang the doorbell of Matsunaga's apartment, but there was no answer. The light was off as well. As I said before, Matsunaga had stayed up all night the night before the drinking party and seemed quite sleepy by the time everyone left. It would not have been strange if he had turned off the light and crawled into bed as soon as he was alone. Wondering what she should do as she stood outside the door, Aki tried turning the doorknob. Matsunaga must have forgotten to lock his door before he went to bed. The door opened. The room was pitch dark. . . ."

"This is just like the story of Ms. A. But listening to you, it does sound like a plausible turn of events."

"That may be. After opening the door, Aki hesitated at the entryway. She felt she shouldn't wake the soundly sleeping Matsunaga just for her convenience. Besides, in the worst case, a groggy Matsunaga might mistake her appearance for a seduction and suddenly come at her. So, without turning on the light, she whispered softly, 'It's Aki, I've forgotten my cell phone, so I've come to pick it up.' She crawled on her knees so as not to have to take off her shoes and proceeded into the pitch-dark room. Having been there many times, she remembered the layout. She said she found her cell phone right off when she felt around on the floor where she had been sitting. She backed out the way she had come in without making a sound, quietly closed the door, and quickly left Matsunaga's room. She said it crossed her mind that it was unsafe to leave the door unlocked, but she told herself he would be all right because he was a man. Aki then jumped onto Reiko's bicycle and returned to the station to meet up with Reiko, who was waiting at the donut shop."

"Didn't she notice anything unusual when she entered Matsunaga's room?"

"No, nothing. Her mind must have been taken up with collecting her cell phone. She was convinced that Matsunaga was fast asleep

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in his bed, and apparently she didn't sense anything or hear any sounds that were eerie."

"I suppose she can't be faulted for that. Say she stayed in Matsunaga's apartment for a few minutes, then it took her about five minutes to return to the station by bicycle, the same amount of time as getting there. In that case, it must have been about eleven-forty when she met up with Reiko at the donut shop."

"Right. During our questioning I had them show me their receipts for the drinks they had ordered. They showed 11:26 for Reiko and 11:41 for Aki, who entered the shop later. The two of them chatted for a while at the donut shop, sobering up. They said they talked about their reactions to the argument between Matsunaga and Miyoshi. As Aki was returning to Yoyogi Hachiman, they left the shop a few minutes before 12:33 A.M., the departure time for the last train toward Shinjuku, and parted at the ticket gate."

3.

While Inspector Norizuki went to the toilet, Rintarō prepared some cold drinks in the kitchen. The night was deepening, but the discussion about the case was only now entering its crucial phase. His father would be wanting a drink about now.

"Hey, that's considerate." Returning to the living room, Inspector Norizuki took a sip.

Rintarō joined him, just to wet his throat.

Bending his neck sideways to give it a stretch, the inspector continued, "I got as far as telling you that Hirotani Aki and Sekiguchi Reiko had parted at Umegaoka Station. I don't have to tell you what happened next. It's almost the same end as Ms. A's story."

"Almost?"

"There are a few differences. For example, Aki didn't drop by Belle Maison Matsubara the following day, and during her questioning she didn't faint when she found out about the message written in blood. But she turned pale when she heard about it and couldn't stop shaking. It will affect her for quite a while."

"It must have been quite a shock."

"Of course it was. It wasn't only Matsunaga's dead body that was right in front of her eyes in that pitch-dark room but also someone who had just committed murder. She must have been in mortal fear. I sent her home with an officer for protection in case of the worst. I've had her watched ever since. It would be good if she could recall something that might be a clue to identifying the murderer, but I don't have much hope of that. After all, the phrase 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' was also a warning aimed at her."

"Can that message be used as physical evidence? The trace of the finger or the handwriting?"

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"No, the murderer is quite clever." His expression glum, Inspector Norizuki turned his eyes to the ashtray on the table. "According to the Identification Section, the words in blood were written with a cigarette butt left in the room, by soaking the filter in blood. The victim was a chain smoker. We haven't found the blood-soaked cigarette butt. It must have been flushed down the toilet. We can't rely on the handwriting, either. It is unnaturally faltering, almost as if it were written by a child."

"Does it look as if it was written with the nondominant hand to hide the penmanship?"

"Yes, that's about it. And now I'd like to have your thoughts. You said there were many versions to the story of Ms. A. Are there any that deal with the murderer's character?"

Since his father had chided him earlier for showing off, Rintarō took care not to be pretentious when he answered, "Even if there were some, it probably wouldn't be of any use. In these kinds of rumors, the murders usually end up being committed by an escaped convict or a crazed killer with a screw loose."

"I thought as much. Just for the record, there's been no report of any prison escapes this month," the inspector said.

Nodding, Rintarō continued, "There's probably influence from an actual crime committed in America in the motif of a psychotic killer leaving a crime-scene message written in blood. For example, in the nineteen sixty-nine Sharon Tate mass murder, where five people including the actress were butchered by the Charles Manson Family, the word 'Pig' was inscribed with the victims' blood on the wall of the crime scene, and at the scene of another murder they committed that same day, the words 'Helter Skelter' were used."

"I've heard of that one. Weren't those words from a Beatles song?"

"Yes. And even further back, from nineteen forty-five to the following year, there was the case of William Heirens, a murderer who killed three females, including a six-year-old girl, for the fun of it. A seventeen-year-old student at the University of Chicago at the time, Heirens left a message written with the victim's lipstick at the crime scene. It said, 'For heaven's sake catch me before I kill more. I cannot control myself.' "

"Hmm. He must have been completely crazy."

"In Heirens's case, it wasn't written in blood, but the memory of these kinds of shocking crimes works on the public's subconscious. And you can see why the 'message written in blood' was made into a symbol of the indiscriminate psychotic murderer. But this is just to say that this was the case for the original urban legend. It doesn't prove definitively that the actual murder at Belle Maison Matsubara was committed by a psychotic, or in the manner of a killer who wantonly knifes passersby."

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Inspector Norizuki rubbed his chin and nodded his satisfaction. "I agree with you on that. As a practical matter, even if we consider just the time factor, I can't conceive that a psychotic with no past connection to the victim would enter Matsunaga's room and kill the occupant."

"What do you mean 'the time factor'?"

"As I explained to you, it was just past eleven P.M. when the club members departed Belle Maison Matsubara. And it was eleven-thirty when Aki, having returned to pick up her cell phone, nearly ran into the murderer in the pitch-dark room. It is much too preposterous to suppose that a total stranger would break into Matsunaga's room and kill him in the span of those thirty minutes, even if he had forgotten to lock his door. I just can't believe that such a thing could happen."

"That is true. In that case, do you think that the message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' was an elaborate trick to make it look as if a wanton psychotic killer was the culprit?"

"Yes. But rather than say it was an elaborate setup, I would say it was done on the spur of the moment. I wasn't sure until I talked to you, but hearing that the phrase is straight out of a popular urban legend, I'm able to have conviction about my theory. That's not all." The inspector set his glass on the table to stress his next point. "When we consider what went on before and after, there's a high probability that Matsunaga's murderer was one of the members of the drinking party on Monday night."

"The way you say that, it sounds as if you already have an idea who the killer is. Is it because of an alibi?"

At Rintarō's anticipation of the next step, the inspector grinned.

"That's about it. From Aki's statement and the content of the message in blood, there can be no mistake that the murderer was in Matsunaga's room around eleven-thirty. Now, turning to everyone's alibi. We've already discussed Hirotani Aki and Sekiguchi Reiko. I can add that not only do we have the times stamped on the receipts, we also have backing for their statements from an attendant at the donut shop. During the fifteen minutes or so before she met with Aki, Reiko occupied a seat within sight of the shop attendant and did not leave the shop. It was about twelve twenty-five when the two of them left the donut shop."

"Seems airtight. Next?"

"The couple, Nozaki Tetsu and Nagashima Yurika, I just told you about. After they parted from Endō Fumiaki, who was going home to Tsutsujigaoka, on the platform at Meidaimae Station, they went toward Kichijōji on the Inogashira Line, and then to her apartment. They were together until morning, and provide alibis for each other."

"Hmm. We can't discard the possibility that they were accom-

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plices, but . . . What about Endō Fumiaki after he left the other two?"

"He stated that he went home directly, without stopping off anywhere. There isn't any direct proof to back up his statement, but we found out that just at that time a classmate, also in the Economics Department, called Endō's cell phone. According to that classmate's statement, he talked continuously with Endō for about ten minutes from eleven twenty-five."

"I see." Rintarō started and slapped his knee. "That was when Aki was in Matsunaga's room. At that moment, the killer must have been hiding in the dark room after killing Matsunaga. So, regardless of where he was, Endō, who was talking on his cell phone with his classmate, couldn't have been the killer."

"Exactly. As for the last one left, Miyoshi Nobuhiko, he doesn't have a definite alibi. According to his statement, after he left Belle Maison Matsubara alone at ten-thirty, he went to several video-game centers in the area, still in a foul mood from his argument with Matsunaga. He played games for about an hour, and then took the train home to Yōga. He lives with his parents and siblings. The family stated that he returned home shortly after midnight."

"So he got home shortly after midnight. Say he left Matsunaga's apartment after eleven-thirty. If he walked to Matsubara Station, took a train on the Tōkyū Setagaya Line, and changed to the Denentoshi Line at Sangenjaya, he would have had time to reach home by then."

"Right. We're looking for witnesses around the game centers, but so far we have no reports of anyone seeing someone fitting Miyoshi's description around that time. Not only doesn't he have an alibi, but also in terms of motive, since he had an intense argument with the victim during the drinking party, Miyoshi seems suspicious to me," Inspector Norizuki stated emphatically.

It was perfectly natural to suspect Miyoshi from what had been discussed so far. Yet, as he sifted through the alibis, Rintarō felt a slight doubt. Since he couldn't put his finger on what specifically was bothering him, he decided to go along for a while longer with his father's theory.

"We were still in the middle of the story with regard to motive, weren't we? You said that there was a story behind the trouble between Matsunaga and Miyoshi—concerning the former club member Sasaki Megumi. What's that all about?"

"It relates to the victim's conduct. And it's typical of young people these days in that drugs were involved."

Inspector Norizuki let the implication hang and reached for another cigarette.

"One of Matsunaga's relatives is a cousin eight years older than

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he who is an internist with a psychiatric specialty. Apparently Matsunaga had something on this cousin. It's probably a trite thing, like he knew of the cousin's extramarital affair or something. In exchange for keeping quiet about this secret, Matsunaga hit his cousin up for drugs that are ordinarily hard to get."

"Were they illegal drugs?"

"No. Only Prozac, an antidepressant put out by an American pharmaceutical company. It's not a crime just to possess it. The victim had some fifty green-and-white capsules hidden away. When the crime scene was investigated, the search of Matsunaga's room revealed the pills in a cardboard box in his closet."

"Prozac is a drug said to promote the production of seratonin in the brain and to be very effective in treating depression. I hear that since it came on the market in America, it's sometimes used as a legal 'happy drug' even by healthy people. . . . Does that mean Matsunaga had a tendency toward depression?"

"No, he himself was quite healthy. He may have tried it once or twice, but there's no indication that he was a regular user. It seems Matsunaga was selling the Prozac he got from his cousin to people he knew as a way to earn some spending money."

Rintarō furrowed his brow at this piece of unexpected information. "Just a minute. If the victim was selling drugs, the motive for the crime could have been trouble related to a drug deal. I don't mean to say a drug user is necessarily a psychotic, but doesn't this completely change the nature of the case?"

"I don't think so. We checked into that possibility, but Matsunaga wasn't selling enough to make him a drug dealer. And he didn't have any drugs other than Prozac." He added that Matsunaga used a rough count, and appeared not to have a ledger or list of buyers, either. Having struck down Rintarō's suspicion with one blow, Inspector Norizuki exhaled smoke and continued, "It's also called SSRI—Selective Seratonin Re-uptake Inhibitor—and there is a similar domestic drug on the market. Insurance will cover that one. Prozac hasn't been approved by the Health and Labor Ministry yet. But it's all right for qualified physicians to prescribe it to patients, and it's no longer rare for people to use the Internet to import it on an individual basis."

"You mean it's rather widely available, so selling it can only bring in enough for spending money?"

"Exactly. If he did it too openly, he would be targeted, and if he approached someone in the know he would be taken advantage of. After all, there are plenty of other routes to get hold of it. Unless he was using it as a way to pick up girls, about all he could do was to sell small amounts to naive, earnest coeds as a cure for May depression.*"

*That syndrome that follows relief at entering university in April after studying so hard for the entrance exams.

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"May depression isn't so prevalent anymore. But are you suggesting that Sasaki Megumi is one of those who bought Prozac from Matsunaga?"

"Yes. Megumi was an intense, introverted type from the start, so she must have been an easy mark for Matsunaga. She regularly bought the drug from him without letting her boyfriend Miyoshi know about it. If that was all, it would have been one thing, but Matsunaga apparently pressed for a physical relationship in exchange for giving her the drug. He probably didn't actually succeed, but this caused Megumi to become deeply neurotic. She couldn't face Miyoshi, and she may also have suffered a reaction to having become dependent on Prozac. Not only did she stop showing up at the Bowling Club, she also stopped attending her classes. Now she is on leave and recuperating at home."

Disheartened, Rintarō said, "That's abominable. I can't blame Miyoshi for holding that against Matsunaga."

"See? There's no doubting that he had a motive. And as to opportunity, if we consider the crime to have been committed by Miyoshi, the time factor that has been the bottleneck for the case will fit exactly."

"How so?"

"It would go like this. Having had a verbal fight full of recriminations with Matsunaga, Miyoshi left Belle Maison Matsubara at ten-thirty. But instead of going to the game center as he claimed in his statement, he could have wandered around nearby, intending to cool his head. He did this for thirty or forty minutes, but he was still angry, so he went back to the party intending to settle the argument. But when he returned to Belle Maison Matsubara, the party had ended, and Room 206 was quiet. He rang the doorbell, but there was no answer, and it appeared that Matsunaga had already gone to bed. Just as he was about to give up and head home, Miyoshi noticed that the door was unlocked."

Folding his arms across his chest, Rintarō uttered without much enthusiasm, "I see. And then?"

"Miyoshi stole into the room without turning on the light, roused the sleeping Matsunaga, and let loose a string of abuse. The time was between eleven-fifteen and eleven-twenty. At this stage I don't think Miyoshi had any clear intent to kill. But having been woken from his sleep, Matsunaga could hardly have stood for this. Mistaking the intruder for a burglar, he may have swung at Miyoshi without first questioning him. The two of them scuffled, and after several rounds, one of them took hold of the ice pick left in the room. As they grappled for it in the dark, Miyoshi's hand faltered and the stainless-steel tip ended up stabbing Matsunaga's chest. The hands of the clock showed half-past eleven. It was then, as Miyoshi was standing in a daze over Matsunaga's dead body in

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the darkened room, that Hirotani Aki, who knew nothing of this, came to retrieve what she had forgotten."

Having recreated the crime as if he had seen it happen, Inspector Norizuki jerked his chin up and sought his son's reaction.

Arms still folded, Rintarō absent-mindedly gazed at the ceiling. Finally he said, "You certainly make the time factor fit. Your theory gives a logical explanation for the victim having been killed in less than thirty minutes after he was left alone. However . . ."

Peering at Rintarō dubiously, the inspector said, "What do you mean, 'However'? Is there something that is unconvincing to you?"

"Yes, a major something. If that were the end of the story, then your theory would hold up. But the problem lies in what comes after that. If we consider Miyoshi to be the murderer, it is inconceivable that he would have written the message in blood. The message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' was not left by Miyoshi."

4.

"I started thinking something was off as I reviewed the alibis of those at the drinking party," Rintarō explained to his father as he unfolded his arms. "I should have realized what it was earlier. Namely, that if Miyoshi were the murderer, then the disadvantage to him of leaving the message in blood far outweighs the advantage of making the crime appear to be like the urban legend."

Inspector Norizuki cocked his head. "Disadvantage?"

"Yes. Let's first look at the advantage. We've been thinking that the message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' was a deliberate trick to make Matsunaga's murder look like a crime committed randomly by a psychotic. However, if you think it over a bit, it's obvious that one couldn't hope to alter the focus of the investigation with such a childish trick. As the phrase is copied straight from a popular urban legend, even if I hadn't told you, sooner or later someone would have noted that fact. Once the message was discovered to be a fake, it is clear that suspicion would fall on whoever harbored hatred toward the victim. The killer would have been able to foresee that much. And even more so from Miyoshi's standpoint, as he had had a confrontation with the victim over a love triangle. To put it another way, there is hardly any advantage for Miyoshi to have left the message in blood."

"What you say makes sense, but isn't it merely a theory born of hindsight?"

"You could say that if we look only at the advantage side. But the disadvantages that come about from leaving the bloody message are even more critical. Can you see? Let's say that, just as you imagined, Miyoshi killed Matsunaga at eleven-thirty P.M., and was nearly bumped into by Aki at the crime scene. Under cover of

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darkness, he succeeded in not being seen by her. In that case, why would he purposely leave a message saying 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' which would tell not only Aki but also the police that he had been there at that time?"

The inspector sucked in air in surprise.

Rintarō continued: "According to your story, Father, Aki wasn't aware that the murderer was hiding in Matsunaga's room until she was told about the bloody message. That means that if the message hadn't been left, no one would have found out that the murderer was at the crime scene at eleven-thirty. The same can be said for the estimated time of death. Without the bloody message, it would have been impossible to specify the time when the crime was committed."

"Yes, what you say is true, but . . ."

"Let's keep this in mind and review the theory that Miyoshi committed the crime. If, as in the initial supposition, he killed Matsunaga at eleven-thirty P.M., he should have been the one to most dislike having the time the crime was committed narrowed down. This was because he had no definite alibi from the time he left Matsunaga's apartment at ten-thirty. As he had no way of establishing an alibi after the fact, all Miyoshi could hope for was that suspicion be deflected from him onto others who had attended the party due to there being no precisely estimated time of death. That is, the wider the range of the estimated time of death, the greater the benefit to him. Though he may have been upset immediately after killing Matsunaga, when he calmed down and became more rational, he would have been able to make such a calculation. That is why I wonder about Miyoshi having left the message written in blood. . . ."

"Just a minute. Isn't it dangerous to jump to such a conclusion?" Recovering a little, Inspector Norizuki attempted to put the brakes on Rintarō's deduction. "We can't assume that Miyoshi assessed the advantages and disadvantages and acted rationally. It is possible that he may have had his attention only on the less likely advantages and impulsively wrote the message."

"I can't see that happening. After all, you yourself said the killer was exceedingly clever. And if Miyoshi had lost his cool, could he have held his breath in the dark and refrained from killing Aki as well?"

The inspector's face betrayed acknowledgment of his weak point. Yet he seemed not to be entirely convinced, and said, as if he were poking at the crumbs left in a lunchbox, "Your argument certainly makes sense, but to me it is, after all, founded on extremely passive grounds."

"What do you mean?"

"The reasoning your theory attributes to Miyoshi is entirely passive. For no matter how much the estimated time of death is

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broadened, it doesn't change Miyoshi's not having an alibi, does it? Wouldn't he be pushing his luck to sit back and do nothing and expect to avoid being suspected?"

Nodding at this commendable objection, Rintarō replied, "Naturally, you would have such a rebuttal. But go back to what you said about passive grounds. If Miyoshi were the culprit, he would also have had an active reason for leaving the scene without writing the message in blood."

"And what would that be?"

"As I said before, if there had been no message in blood, when Aki returned at eleven-thirty to pick up what she had forgotten, no one would have found out that the killer, that is, a third person other than Aki and the victim, had been there. In fact, she had visited the victim's apartment entirely alone within the limits of the estimated time of death. This meant that the first person to be suspected would be none other than Aki herself. If the message hadn't existed, would the police have taken her statement as the truth? I can't think that would be the case. If Miyoshi had been there, I'm sure he would have thought the same way—that he had motive and no alibi. And that by quitting the scene without leaving evidence that someone else had been there he would be helping to shift the suspicion of murder to Aki, who had the misfortune to have shown up at the scene of the crime. This wouldn't at all be an unnatural way to think."

Rintarō stopped to wait for his father's response. The theory of Miyoshi Nobuhiko as murder suspect was about to go under.

Still, the inspector seemed to persist in promoting his own theory. With a jut of his chin he said, "It might be that Miyoshi was in love with Aki. Weighing the fact that Aki would be suspected versus the fact that his crime would be exposed, what if he deliberately chose to leave a message that would be disadvantageous to himself?"

Shaking his head firmly, Rintarō countered, "That is an impossibility. If Miyoshi loved Aki, he wouldn't have left a message written in blood that would frighten her. It could result in her becoming deeply traumatized, just like Sasaki Megumi. I'm sorry, Father, but you have no more escape routes. The Miyoshi-as-culprit theory is now completely disproved. He is not the one who killed Matsunaga."

"Mmm." Letting out a moan of defeat, the inspector, having nothing else to do, lit a cigarette. He smoked it wordlessly for a while, but then he slapped himself on the forehead. "All right. I agree. I'll take back my suspicions about Miyoshi. But this means the investigation is back to square one. If it wasn't Miyoshi, then who the hell killed Matsunaga?"

"There's no need to go back to square one."

The inspector raised his eyebrows. "Does that mean you have an idea who the real murderer is?"

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"Yes. All we have to do is to look at our argument from the opposite direction. We should ask what conditions would allow for the disadvantage of leaving the message in blood to work contrarily, to favor the killer. In other words, who would gain the most from the existence of the message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' That's what we need to look at."

His cigarette still at his lips, Inspector Norizuki suddenly glared.

"Do you mean Hirotani Aki? You just said that if there had been no message in blood, she would undoubtedly have been the first to be suspected."

"Just as you say. The reason Aki's statement was recognized as being true to fact was due to the message in blood. What if, though, her statement was a boldfaced lie? What if, when she went back to Belle Maison Matsubara to retrieve her cell phone, Matsunaga was still alive, and no one was hiding in the darkened room?"

"Then the message saying 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' was . . ."

"Of course, Aki herself wrote it."

"What?! I can't buy that."

But Rintarō persisted. "Let's start from where her story begins. When Aki went back to Matsunaga's apartment, did she really not turn on the light? Her own statement is the only thing to back this up. You mentioned that in her statement she said one of the reasons she didn't turn on the light was that in the worst case, a groggy Matsunaga might mistake her appearance for a seduction and suddenly attack her. What if this statement wasn't hypothetical but what actually happened, and Aki let it slip out?"

"What actually happened? You mean Matsunaga tried to assault Aki?"

"It's not impossible. After all, Matsunaga had made a prior attempt at seducing a friend's girlfriend. Returning to Matsunaga's apartment to retrieve her cell phone after the party, Aki entered the unlocked room and turned on the light, waking the soundly sleeping Matsunaga. Drunk and half-asleep, Matsunaga seized the chance of Aki having come back alone and tried to take advantage of her. Of course Aki resisted. Desperate to protect herself, Aki grabbed the ice pick used during the party, which was within reach, and stabbed Matsunaga in the chest. I doubt she had any intention to kill him, but that one stab was fatal, and he slumped to his death."

"That section is similar to the Miyoshi-as-murderer theory."

"Is that sour grapes?" Rintarō grinned. "It goes without saying that Aki was shaken up. Coming to her senses with difficulty, she considered how she might conceal her crime. Her problem was Sekiguchi Reiko, who was waiting for her return at the donut shop. The police would eventually find out from Reiko that Aki

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had returned alone to Matsunaga's apartment to reclaim what she had forgotten. At that point, she would be the first to be suspected. Was there some way she could avoid this predicament? At that moment, what flashed across her mind like a revelation was the story she had heard from someone of Ms. A and the murderer who had left a message written in blood. She might be able to thwart the police investigation if she acted the part of Ms. A, who narrowly evaded becoming a second victim of the person who had just killed a fellow university student in the dark. Having thought this up on the spot, Aki copied the urban legend and left the message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' Then she turned off the light, left the apartment, and rode the bicycle she had borrowed from Reiko back to the donut shop as though nothing had happened."

"If that were the case," said Inspector Norizuki doubtfully, "what about her reaction when she saw the message during her questioning?"

"Of course that was an act."

"But I can't believe it was."

"That's likely because you had a preconception as to what her reaction would be."

"I wonder. It's not as though I've learned nothing during the many years I've spent in the interrogation room. If she had fainted on the spot like Ms. A did, I would admit that Aki had faked it. But her reaction was the real stuff. And even if my perception is wrong, your theory has holes in it."

Rintarō sat up so as to squarely face his father's counterattack. "What holes?"

"It's a time problem. As the donut-shop receipts show, there were at most fifteen minutes when Aki was alone after she parted from Reiko. And ten of those minutes were taken up bicycling round-trip between Umegaoka Station and Belle Maison Matsubara. Even with a liberal estimate, Aki could have been in Matsunaga's room for only five minutes. Just think about it: Five minutes is only three hundred seconds. On your theory, in just that short amount of time, Aki began to struggle with Matsunaga, who tried to take advantage of her," as he continued, the inspector counted the points off on his fingers, "stabbed him with the ice pick, then, barely recovering from the shock of killing someone from over-defensiveness, she immediately thought up the brilliant idea to make it seem like a copycat of the urban legend, wrote the message in blood with a cigarette filter, flushed the filter down the toilet, washed the blood from the ice pick and her hands at the sink, made certain she left nothing, and quickly left the scene of the crime. And that's not all. She would have needed time to straighten out her appearance, which must have become disheveled during her struggle with the victim, so that Reiko wouldn't suspect anything. This might be possible in one of

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your novels, but in actuality, do you think she had enough time to do all of that in just five minutes? What's more, Aki is a nineteen-year-old college student, not a professional killer. She couldn't possibly have remained calm enough to complete all that so quickly and efficiently immediately after she had unexpectedly killed someone."

The tables had turned. Uncharacteristically red-faced, Rintarō dejectedly scratched his head. "I have to admit that the time factor is rather difficult. . . . But what if Aki used an illusion as a trick, causing Reiko's sense of time to be off, and was able to squeeze out more than five minutes?"

"Hardly. What about the times stamped on the donut-shop receipts?"

"Maybe she pilfered another customer's receipt and switched it with hers or Reiko's receipt?"

Inspector Norizuki gave a snort. "Now you're forcing an improbability. I told you we have corroboration from the donut-shop attendant regarding the alibis for Hirotani Aki and Sekiguchi Reiko. There are no holes in their statements. I say there is no chance that Aki killed Matsunaga."

5.

Still, Rintarō was unable to give up on his theory that Aki had committed the crime. Various possibilities branched out in his head. Somewhere there must be a shortcut that would clear the time obstacle. . . .

After a while, he spoke. "What if we look at it this way? The crime committed on Monday night wasn't spontaneous, but planned out to the smallest detail."

"You mean Aki planned it? But Aki had no reason for killing Matsunaga, did she?"

"Maybe she did. Just as with Sasaki Megumi, drugs may have been involved. Aki may have regularly obtained Prozac from Matsunaga, but there was some trouble over the deal. When that became a big problem, Aki decided to kill Matsunaga."

"Hmm. Trouble regarding Prozac deals," Inspector Norizuki said, without much enthusiasm. "But I wouldn't think that would lead to murder—though it can't be ruled out completely. Well, what then?"

"In her murder plan, Aki decided to use the rumor about the murderer leaving a message written in blood at the crime scene. It goes without saying that her objective was to deflect suspicion by playing the role of Ms. A. So, on Monday night, she didn't happen to forget her cell phone in Matsunaga's room; she had planned it. This was to create a natural reason for returning to Belle Maison Matsubara after the drinking party was over—she may have already taken the ice pick with her at that time. And it was probably Aki who suggested that she borrow Reiko's bicycle in front of

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Umegaoka Station. If Reiko had gone back with her, she would have hindered Aki's committing the crime. At the same time, arranging to meet her at the donut shop must have been done with the purpose of creating an alibi."

"Why was the door to Matsunaga's apartment unlocked when Aki returned to Belle Maison Matsubara? It's too convenient to have been a coincidence."

"Of course, it wasn't a coincidence. She must have secretly told the victim before the party that she would return alone later. I don't know what kind of reason she gave, but Matsunaga was waiting for her without going to sleep, unaware that she had murderous intentions. Aki pedaled the bicycle as fast as she could back to Belle Maison Matsubara. As soon as she entered Room 206, she stabbed Matsunaga in the chest with the ice pick when he welcomed her—with no hesitation."

"Wait. There was evidence on Matsunaga's body that indicated he had struggled with his assailant."

"Aki faked the evidence afterward. As she had planned, after she dipped the cigarette filter in his blood, wrote the message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' and quickly took care of all those things that you just counted off, Aki hurriedly left the room. With a plan firmly in place, it wouldn't be impossible to complete all of these steps within five minutes. In actuality, there was no grappling with the victim, so her hair and clothes were not messed up. After this, Aki again pedaled full speed to the station and met up with Reiko at the donut shop as if nothing had happened. How about that, Father? I would think that it was quite possible for Aki to kill Matsunaga even if she only had about five minutes."

The response from the inspector was not favorable. Blowing a lungful of smoke at Rintarō's face, he retorted, "It might be possible—as a desktop plan. But your theory has a fatal flaw."

"Oh?"

"Let's say she did plan Matsunaga's murder," the inspector said cuttingly. "Why would she need to fake it as an urban legend in order to accomplish it? If it were a spontaneously committed crime, I could understand—Aki's random behavior happened to coincide with the story of Ms. A and became the impetus for leaving the bloody-lettered message. But if the murder was premeditated, nowhere is there a reason to embellish it with the urban legend motif. There are many other ways to set it up, so why would she have concocted such a convoluted, intricate plan? Such a plan, which mistakes the means for the end, could only be entertained in the abstract by someone lacking a real necessity for committing the crime."

Rintarō was forced into silence. He had to admit it was exactly as his father said.

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6.

"This makes it a draw between us in terms of injuries." Inspector Norizuki spoke as if to encourage the despondent Rintarō. He had just returned from the kitchen, fresh drinks in hand. He set the glasses on the table and sat down heavily.

"Don't be so discouraged. The night is still young. Let's rethink the case one more time, going back to our first assumptions. I don't buy your identifying Hirotani Aki as the murderer, but I don't think the direction of your reasoning was wrong. As you suggested, Matsunaga's killer was someone who would benefit from leaving the message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?'"

Sighing deeply as he reached for his glass, Rintarō said, "The problem then becomes the nature of the benefit, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. But I don't have any bright ideas on that. Shall we go over the list of those at the party one more time? It's not unusual in a race in which the front-runner and its rival horse fall for a dark horse that no one had paid attention to to carry off the victory."

So saying, the inspector drew lines through the names listed in his notebook.

~~Matsunaga Toshiki~~	~~Sciences Dept.~~	~~2nd year~~	~~male~~	(Meidaimae)
Nozaki Tetsu	Sciences Dept.	2nd year	male	(Machida)
~~Miyoshi Nobuhiko~~	~~Law Dept.~~	~~2nd year~~	~~male~~	(Yōga)
Nagashima Yurika	Literature Dept.	2nd year	female	(Kichijōji)
Endō Fumiaki	Economics Dept.	1st year	male	(Tsutsujigaoka)
~~Hirotani Aki~~	~~Literature Dept.~~	~~1st year~~	~~female~~	~~(Yoyogi Hachiman)~~
Sekiguchi Reiko	Economics Dept.	1st year	female	(Umegaoka)

"Of the four remaining, can we exclude the two who have solid alibis for eleven-thirty P.M.—Endō Fumiaki and Sekiguchi Reiko? If so, we can look at the couple—Nozaki Tetsu and Nagashima Yurika. As you pointed out before, if these two had colluded and concocted a false alibi . . . Huh? What is it, Rintarō?"

While the inspector was speaking, Rintarō suddenly looked up at the ceiling, his jaw dropping open. From his lips escaped the whisper, ". . . a solid alibi."

He did not stir at all for a time, until eventually his eyes began to shine brightly. All of a sudden, he slammed both of his hands on the table.

"That's it! That's the only possibility! I've been blind!"

Inspector Norizuki was dumbfounded at this turnaround. "Hey, are you all right?"

"Sure I am, Father. Actually I should say I've finally come to my senses. The answer has been right in front of our noses all along, and I didn't even notice it."

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"In front of our noses?"

"Yes. The clue to the truth was something I said when we were discussing the Miyoshi-as-killer theory. Didn't I say that if there had been no message in blood, it would have been impossible to pin down the time the crime was committed?"

"Yeah, I remember hearing something like that."

"That's exactly the advantage gained by leaving the message in blood. It's a simple but extremely effective alibi trick. Can I explain? The medical examiner estimated the victim's time of death to be between eleven P.M. on Monday and one A.M. the following day at its broadest. This means that the actual crime could have been committed before eleven-thirty or after that time. But the murderer used Aki's statement and left the message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' to plant the impression that the crime was committed at eleven-thirty—despite the fact that the murderer was not in Matsunaga's room at that time. To put it another way, the person who benefited from the existence of this message, that is, the real killer of Matsunaga, had to be someone who had a solid alibi for eleven-thirty P.M."

Rintarō had rushed on without pausing for breath. As if his son's excitement had transferred to him, Inspector Norizuki was now on the edge of his seat. "I see. The trick of using preconception as a counterattack. In that case, the couple Nozaki Tetsu and Nagashima Yurika, whose alibi isn't limited to eleven-thirty don't fit the criterion. The ones who have a solid alibi for eleven-thirty P.M. are Endō Fumiaki and Sekiguchi Reiko, but—"

"Endō isn't the killer. I can say that because he doesn't meet the other criterion necessary for leaving the message in blood."

"What other criterion?"

"In order to leave that message in blood, the person had to know not only that Aki went back to Matsunaga's apartment to retrieve what she had forgotten, but also the fact that she left the room *without ever having turned on the light.* Without knowing that, it would be meaningless, impossible, really, to leave the message 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' Endō was not in a position to have known in advance about the details of Aki's actions. Therefore, he is not the killer."

Solemn-faced, Inspector Norizuki said, "That leaves one person . . ."

"Sekiguchi Reiko. She meets both criteria that I just set out. One: At eleven-thirty P.M. Reiko was at the donut shop at Umegaoka Station and had a solid alibi. Two: Reiko met up at the donut shop with Aki, who had returned from Matsunaga's apartment, and had the chance to hear from her the details of what happened in his room."

"Hmm. Most likely Aki told her about it right off. The two of them left the donut shop around twelve twenty-five A.M. That means that

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after parting with Aki at the station's ticket gate, Reiko went back to Belle Maison Matsubara. What was her reason for that?"

"This is just my supposition, but I think it involves the Prozac that Matsunaga had. Let's say Reiko purchased the drug periodically from Matsunaga. He may have charged more than the normal rate, and Reiko may have had difficulty paying up. But that night, Reiko heard from Aki about Matsunaga's room—that he was fast asleep with the door unlocked."

Stroking his chin, Inspector Norizuki said, deep in thought, "I get it. And I wouldn't be surprised, from the impression I got talking to her, if she were taking Prozac. She seemed to be kind of a highly-strung type, one of the best students from the countryside. That's the type who sometimes do bad things on the spur of the moment, though they don't look like they would. On your supposition, then, Reiko crept into Matsunaga's apartment while he was asleep and tried to steal some Prozac, which was put away somewhere."

"When we look at it that way, everything fits into place. It took five minutes for her to return to Belle Maison Matsubara from the station on her own bicycle. She entered Room 206 just after twelve-thirty. Leaving the room dark so she wouldn't wake the sleeping Matsunaga, Reiko began to search the apartment, feeling around with her hands. But she must have tripped on something in the dark, making a loud noise. Woken up by the noise, Matsunaga noticed Reiko's presence. He must have realized right away that she had come for the Prozac. Angered, Matsunaga hurled himself onto Reiko and grappled with her. Here our familiar ice pick comes into play and Reiko stabs Matsunaga dead. . . . At the latest, this all happened before twelve forty-five."

"That's just barely within the range of the estimated time of death. Then what?"

"With Matsunaga's body in front of her, Reiko probably couldn't think of anything for a while. Her initial aim of stealing the Prozac must have flown out of her mind. But she had plenty of time to come to her senses and devise a coverup. She could bicycle back to her place in Umegaoka, so she didn't need to be concerned about the time of the last train. As her breathing returned to normal in the dark, while she gazed at Matsunaga's dead body, Reiko remembered that Aki had returned to Matsunaga's apartment to retrieve what she had forgotten. That led quite naturally to her recalling the rumor of the message in blood that she had heard from someone. If she set it up so that it seemed Aki had narrowly avoided bumping into the murderer . . . Of course, at the time that Aki actually went back to Matsunaga's apartment, he was still alive, fast asleep, unaware of her presence. But, if Reiko created conditions in which it would appear that Matsunaga had already been killed and the killer was hiding in the room, her alibi of being at the donut

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shop in front of the station at that time would clear her of suspicion. Reiko must have smiled slightly at her idea. She stood up and found Matsunaga's cigarette lighter to use for a light. Then, picking up a cigarette butt, she dipped it into the blood flowing from the victim's wound. Holding this in her nondominant hand, she wrote the message on the wall—'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?' "

Awhile later, postcards, always with the same message, began arriving once a week for Ms. A. They were sent by Ms. C, who had been her best friend and a member of the same club. The sender's address was the medical correctional institution in Hachiōji. When Ms. A moved, the deliveries would stop for a while, but someone must have been secretly looking up her address, for soon the postcards, with the same message, would start arriving at the new address. Written on the back of the postcard, always in red pencil, in an unsteady scrawl, were the words, "Why didn't you turn on the light?"

Every time she read these words, Ms. A felt a chill go up her spine. She also felt that she could never get rid of her regret—if, that night when she had returned to his room, she had turned on the light and woken B, then he would not have been killed! And her best friend, Ms. C, would not have been so burdened by her guilt that she went insane. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

MacNaughton or MacNeice

by James Powell

Sixty-odd years ago in Toronto, on the wrong end of Clarence Street, stood a beverage room named the Duke of Clarence, a brick building with two entrances, one to the ladies and escorts' room, the other to the men's.

In the men's beverage room the waiters moved from table to table selling glasses of beer and ale from large trays, making change from canvas money aprons. Overhead, from opposite corners of the room, ran two lengths of green tinsel rope. Where they crossed, someone had hung a red paper bell, for it was almost Christmas. During the daylight hours, the Duke of Clarence was dark. By law, all street windows had to be frosted glass to a height of seven feet lest some passerby be tempted inside by the sight of sad-faced men (or ladies and their escorts) drinking in the gloom.

At a table in one corner sat two plain-clothes policemen. Inspec-

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tor Poole, having salted his beer, put down the quilted-glass salt shaker, watched the fresh effervescence in the glass, and asked, "Don't mind coming here, MacNeice?"

"Not at all, sir," said Sergeant MacNeice. "Mrs. MacNeice and I sometimes do. Next door, I mean."

"You never came with MacNaughton?" asked Poole.

"Only Boxing Day, sir. MacNaughton wasn't what you'd call convivial. He seldom went out after his wife left him. But Boxing Day was a little tradition of ours. You see, MacNaughton never got anything in the way of Christmas presents. He liked to joke that Santa didn't know where he lived. But I always got more than I needed. So we'd meet here Boxing Day and I'd pass him one or two of mine. A flat fifty of Black Cat cigarettes, me not being a smoker. Or maybe a bottle of aftershave. He likes the lilac-scented stuff. At least he did then."

After receiving more than half a dozen nominations for Canada's Arthur Ellis Award for Best Crime Story, last year James Powell finally took home the prize (a hanged-man statuette) with the *EQMM* story "Bottom Walker" (5/02). Another of his *EQMM* stories, "The Jewels of Atlantis," is currently nominated for the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus Award. We wish him luck, and congratulate him on honors well deserved and long overdue. †

MacNeice and MacNaughton had been partners for ten years with a record of convictions that made them the pride of the station house. The secret of their success was their skill in the interrogation room.

MacNaughton was a tall, big-shouldered Ulsterman whose permanent scowl had so impressed the Toronto police recruiting team on their visit to Belfast twenty years before. His stare was like a shout, his eyebrow contemptuous. He liked to bully suspects, crowding their space and blowing cigarette smoke in their faces. He made it clear he was only waiting for an excuse to beat the living hell out of them.

MacNeice, a milder, politer sort, seemed hurt by the tone of much of MacNaughton's questions. His manner suggested he would do his best to prevent his partner from doing bodily harm. Someday, MacNeice seemed to say, he might be proud if the suspect dated his daughter.

The two men were a great team, playing the criminal like a hockey puck, passing him back and forth until, sooner or later, their combination of the intimidating fist and the sympathetic ear would good-cop, bad-cop a confession out of him.

But then the war came. The police lost many men to the Provost Corp and the army. Those who remained were expected to do the work of two. Partnerships like MacNeice and MacNaughton became a luxury the home front couldn't afford. So MacNaughton

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was transferred out of town, though Poole promised they'd be teamed up again at war's end.

In the following months, MacNeice tried to be both good cop and bad cop. He slammed the interrogation room door harder. He practiced making ugly faces in the mirror in the john and reread his list of MacNaughton's swear words until they no longer made his ears tingle. He even took up smoking though it made him very sick at first and distressed his wife considerably.

It was all wasted effort. In fact, once when he tried a bit of MacNaughton's tough-guy business on Ronnie Bender, a small-time pimp and black-marketer with more crooks and turns than a tree, Bender snickered in his face. "You got the words down, MacNeice," he said. "But you don't got the tune." Ronnie had risen somewhat in social stature since 1939 when so many of his betters in the underworld enlisted in the armed forces; stature, as he explained, he'd lose if he confessed to anything or gave up anyone to MacNeice.

Until today Inspector Poole had been patient about the drop-off in the station house's conviction rate. But patience wears thin. So when Poole asked MacNeice to meet him later for a beer at the Duke of Clarence, MacNeice came expecting to get a royal dressing-down.

Instead, halfway through his beer Poole said, "Drastic times require drastic measures, MacNeice. You can't hug confessions out of the sort we deal with." Here he lifted a small, old-fashioned leather case with a strap handle from between his feet and placed it on the table. Then he laid both hands on the box to emphasize that it had to do with what he was about to say.

"Back in the Old Country we Pooles were always in domestic service. Great-aunt Grace worked as a private nurse to demented members of families of quality. My dad was butler to a London doctor whose study was the primitive duality of man. The doctor concocted a potion to arouse the darker side of his nature and a restorative draught or antidote to quell it again. By studying his darker side he hoped eventually to cut himself free of it. He kept this experiment a secret, for if it fell into evil hands, a criminal's, let us say, the man might just as well use it to free himself of whatever shreds of human decency were left to him and become a total villain.

"In any event, the doctor's experiments got out of hand. He committed many terrible deeds under the influence of his potion before dying a suicide's death. Those deeds cast such a shadow that my dad felt obliged to emigrate, bringing with him the last of the doctor's strange potion in lieu of wages due.

"Settling here, Dad took to drink, a weakness in our family. Even Great-aunt Grace kept her private gin bottle close at hand. Anyway, in his cups Dad liked to talk about the doctor's experiments. Well, I kept my ears open and now I'm glad I did. I may have the solution to our little problem." He snapped open the box

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whose bottom half had been fitted with two holes. One contained a bottle with a glass stopper. The other hole was empty.

"It seems the doctor used up the antidote," said Poole. "But I think I know how we can get around that." Poole took a swallow of beer before continuing. "Of course, I'm not speaking as your superior. We're just two men fighting the battle on the home front. We don't want to let the boys down, right? As old Winnie says, 'Give us the tools and we'll finish the job.'"

Poole waited for MacNeice's cautious nod. Then he said, "Dosage is the ticket. Dad believed the doctor's mistake was taking too much, which was why he needed the antidote. He himself, my dad, tried the liquid twice on the sly, once just before approaching the good doctor for an increase in his wages and again before a dispute with a tradesman involving less than satisfactory goods. Both times, a teaspoon of the stuff was enough to give my dad a nasty little edge that carried the day with no more side effect than a slight headache and no antidote required." Poole slid the bottle across the table. "Stuff like that could work wonders in the interrogation room, if you follow my meaning. A good-cop, bad-cop solo, so to speak."

Well, war or not, MacNeice had no intention of swigging unknown substances. So he decided to treat the Duke of Clarence business as Poole's way of offering him a second chance, an opportunity to try harder. When he got back to the station house MacNeice put the bottle in a desk drawer and forgot about it.

And it might have stayed forgotten if, in the week after the disaster of the Dieppe raid in 1942 when so many Canadian soldiers were killed or captured, the Morality Squad hadn't brought in Ronnie Bender again, this time charged with selling opium to his girls who, like many in their profession, thought opium kept them from getting pregnant. Poole was prepared to let Bender walk in return for the name of his drug supplier. He handed him over to MacNeice for questioning.

Bender sat smoking at the table in the interrogation room in the care of a constable with three buttons undone on his tunic. When MacNeice came through the door he saw Bender's downcast face brighten into a smile. "Hey, MacNeice," said Bender, waving with the two fingers that held his cigarette. Then and there MacNeice knew he wasn't going to get a damn thing out of the man. He turned on his heels and left the room.

Back at his desk, MacNeice took out Poole's bottle and opened the drawer where he kept his cough-syrup spoon. Then he measured out a careful dose and took it with a trembling hand. The taste was metallic, like the flat of a knife blade drawn across the tongue. MacNeice swallowed and put the bottle away. Then he waited. Nothing happened. Had Poole been talking through his

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hat? Or had time robbed the liquid of its potency?

Then it began. First came the pounding of another, a faster heartbeat in his ears. Now a thick yellow fog came tumbling into the room from under the hallway door. Startled, MacNeice stood up. The fog rose quickly until the desk lamp and then the ceiling lights were tawny smears. The pounding in his ears grew louder. Suddenly MacNeice understood that this fog was his natural element. He could feel the muscles of his face building themselves into a terrible smile. He ground his teeth together. He was ready, hell, he was eager to get back to the interrogation room.

The hallway had become a narrow street where fog blurred every line. MacNeice felt the cobbles under his feet. He heard menacing footsteps and was not surprised to discover they were his own. He wore the fog like a borrowed, overlarge overcoat. From the corners of his eyes he saw vague creeping and crawling creatures following in the wake of his coattails. He reached a corner. Down another narrow street a hurdy-gurdy ground out a hymn. When MacNeice looked toward it the music stopped. MacNeice strode straight on. A door opened as he passed, and the light made the fog incandescent. He heard a moment of ugly laughter and an out-of-tune piano. Then the door closed. Now lights were bobbing toward him in smeary arcs. He jumped aside as a hansom cab rushed out of the fog and clattered past him.

Reaching the door he wanted, MacNeice took a deep breath and stepped inside. The yellow fog followed after him, smudging the interrogation room lights. He gave the door a healthy slam. Bender jumped and butted out his cigarette. The constable buttoned his tunic. As he crossed the room, MacNeice could feel his terrible smile grow still more terrible.

Nose to nose with Bender, he took out a cigarette and put it between his lips. Bender fumbled for his matchbox, struck a match, and held up the flame in nervous thumb and forefinger. MacNeice clamped his hand around them and slowly lit his cigarette, blowing the smoke in Bender's face. Keeping his grip firm on the thumb and forefinger, MacNeice said, "I hear you've got a name for me, Ronnie."

Bender watched the flame while his jaw moved soundlessly.

MacNeice waited. But suddenly the alien heartbeat in his ears stopped and the fog disappeared down the cracks in the floor. MacNeice's cruel smile went slack. The effects of Poole's liquid had worn off. MacNeice let the match fall to the floor. "Excuse me for a moment, will you, Ronnie?" he said offhandedly, and left the room.

MacNeice intended to go back to his desk for a second dose. But out in the hall he thought better of it. He had just been one hell of a bad cop. Time for the good cop part of his solo. When he went back into the Interrogation Room Bender was still trying to figure

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out what had happened. MacNeice offered him a cigarette and lit it for him. Then he glanced over at the door to the hall as if to remind Bender who might come through it again. "You were about to say, Ronnie?"

Bender gave MacNeice the name Poole wanted. Then he said, "I think maybe I'll leave town for a bit."

MacNeice nodded his approval. "Good man, Ronnie," he said. "Don't come back on my account."

MacNeice started back to his desk to nurse a very nasty little headache. But then he decided, why waste the damn thing? Last night the police had picked up a drunk with an open mickey of rye in his pocket. The arresting constable suspected it came from a bootlegger new to the neighborhood. But the drunk refused to say where he'd gotten the bottle. MacNeice had the man brought up to the interrogation room, where his own nasty little headache and the prisoner's nasty little hangover combined to provide the bootlegger's address.

MacNeice was over his headache by the time he got home. But at the dinner table when his wife described her day, a recitation that always gave him pleasure, she went on a bit longer than usual and for a moment he felt that other heartbeat in his ear.

That evening, as they had planned, the MacNeices went to the Alhambra to see *The Wolf Man* with Lon Chaney, Jr. After a *Canada Carries On* short subject about a Hamilton, Ontario family's six-foot-high ball of metal foil saved from cigarette packs to aid the war effort came the movie. Its talk of wolfbane blooming and full moons brought the pounding back to MacNeice's ears and he found himself rubbing the stubble on his cheek.

Poole had Bender's drug supplier picked up. It turned out the man also ran a large-scale fencing operation for stolen goods. If he was tight-lipped during the first part of his interview with good cop MacNeice, he became a regular chatterbox when bad cop MacNeice returned well fortified with a double spoonful from Poole's bottle. The leads and information the man gave them would keep MacNeice, the station house, and police throughout the city busy for many months to come. (Soon so many criminals were in jail or had skipped town that people were starting to call the city "Toronto the Good.")

The days following the Allied invasion of Sicily were busy ones for MacNeice. His interrogations required so much tricky good-cop, bad-cop choreography that he was afraid he'd meet himself coming and going. (And if he had, he suspected he wouldn't like the person he met.) But what disturbed MacNeice more was the fact that each time it took more of the potion to get himself to where he needed to be and a little longer for the effects to dissipate. Soon he was scheduling the bad-cop parts for late afternoon

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so he'd have overnight to recover. (It was during this time that his wife moved out and went to live with her mother.) In a few more months MacNeice had to plan bad cop for Friday afternoons so he'd have the weekend to recover.

MacNeice toasted D-Day with the last of Poole's liquid. He finished the bottle with a certain regret. He would miss the blearily lit and cobbled street on the way to the interrogation room. By now his fog overcoat fit him like a glove and he was master of the terrible, fawning creatures who followed his coattails. The hurdy-gurdy played the bawdy songs he liked. He stood his ground now when the hansoms came. When the horse reared back the coachman swallowed his anger and whispered, "Sorry, guv'nor. Didn't see it was you."

Yes, he'd miss all that. But the good-cop, bad-cop solo took a lot out of a man. And there was a real pleasure in being part of a team and finessing a suspect into confessing. Anyway, soon the war would be over and things would get back to normal. He and MacNaughton would be partners again. MacNeice was looking forward to that.

After he drank that last dose MacNeice waited for his good-cop side to return as, eventually, it always had. But it took its time. As the days passed, he tried to fake the good-cop part, pretending to be polite, refining his language, closing the door quietly. But in the end, nothing could hold back that terrible smile for long. By the time the British Army reached the Rhine, MacNeice had to admit to himself that his good-cop side was gone forever.

On Boxing Day 1945 MacNeice brooded over beer and cigarettes in the Duke of Clarence, where he was now spending most of his time away from the station house. Soon he'd have a partner. Not MacNaughton, of course. Not now. You can't have two bad cops on a good-cop, bad-cop team. More than likely he'd get some namby-pamby wet-behind-the-ears fresh out of training, somebody he'd have to teach the good-cop ropes. As he scowled at the prospect, a shadow fell across the table. For a moment MacNeice didn't look up. The waiters making their rounds knew to give him a fresh beer if his glass was empty, take their money from the change on the table, and go about their business.

Now a hand reached down and placed two flat fifties of Buckinghams on the table, and a half-familiar voice said, "Merry Christmas, MacNeice, you old bugger. Poole says Santa doesn't know your address anymore. So these are for you. I've given up the filthy habit."

MacNeice raised his head. Through the fog and bleary lights he saw MacNaughton standing there. At least, it looked like MacNaughton. But the man was smiling and so were his eyes. MacNeice looked down at his glass. Had he drunk too much?

Then MacNaughton said, "Poole said I'd find you here. He says we're teaming up again. I mean, if that's all right with you." Mac-

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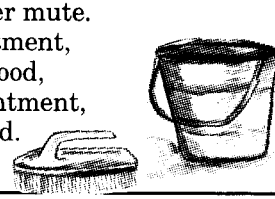
Naughton pointed to the other chair. "Mind if I sit down?"

Mind? Hell no. MacNeice smiled his terrible smile and meant every inch of it. He'd just remembered Poole's leather box with its place for two bottles. MacNeice had been told the empty place once held the used-up antidote. Now he realized he had been deceived. Poole's father had taken two bottles of the potion in lieu of wages due. Poole had given the other bottle to MacNaughton so he could do the good-cop, bad-cop solo, too. MacNeice was smiling so hard his face ached. He and MacNaughton were partners again. He was glad the holidays were over so they could get back to work. By God, what a team they'd make this time around! ●

Frozen Assets
by Katherine H. Brooks

Frank was aware from the day that he married
That Natalie reveled in keeping things neat.
The moment they entered their home she was carried
Away with removing the mud from his feet!
She scrubbed at the walls of the bathroom with vigor
And loosened the tiles till they dropped to the floor.
Her basket of cleansers got bigger and bigger;
Each day she went shopping to purchase some more.
She scrubbed at the rug till the color was faded,
She laundered all day with a terrible zest,
And Frank was convinced that her outlook was jaded,
And vowed to be rid of this terrible pest.
One day as she packaged the chicken, and folded
The corners to make it incredibly straight,
He splattered his coffee, and Natalie scolded,
Inspiring a feeling that bordered on hate.
In a flash he was pushing her into the freezer
And locking the lid. He was free as a bird!
He could tell from the noise that the act didn't please her.
She wailed like a banshee, but nobody heard.
Then he settled awhile till the racket abated,
While slurping his coffee and spotting his suit,
Assuring himself that the time he had waited
Was surely enough to have rendered her mute.
He lifted the lid with a smile of contentment,
Quite devil-may-care, in a grandiose mood,
And Natalie flashed him a look of resentment,
And coldly continued arranging the food.



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THE WINDOW

by Kevin Wignall

When Kevin Wignall's first novel, the thriller *People Die* (S&S), was published in the U.S. in 2002, *Publishers Weekly* raved: "Crisp, lean prose with assault-rifle impact zips the reader across international borders.... The plot is worthy of the best British spymasters.... Wignall [is] an author to watch." His new novel, *For the Dogs,* is due out shortly after this unusual holiday story, his *EQMM* debut. ✝

Spend Christmas in Vienna. He'd seen the adverts, just like the ones for Salzburg, Lapland, places he supposed people associated with the season at hand—with happiness, warmth, a Christmas magic that always seemed to elude them at home.

They were all around him now, the people who'd bought into it, wrapped up against the cold in clothes that weren't quite snug enough, convincing themselves that another glass of Gluhwein was all they really needed to thaw the frozen marrow in their bones. Or sitting in cafes, with hot chocolate, coffee, torte, strudel, soaking up every sweet-toothed cliché so they could go home and say to their friends, "We spent Christmas in Vienna, and it was so beautiful, you couldn't imagine."

Bailey was having none of it. He didn't want to be in Vienna, and he'd long seen Christmas for what it really was, a package tour for the soul, nothing more. He wanted to be home, was already wishing himself forward a day so he could be there, the holiday unmarked, alone in Bermuda.

It was all he ever wanted, the only reason he did this, too: for the luxury it afforded him of being alone, of being able to head out to sea on his boat, to lose himself in the urgent serenity of the ocean. He needed nothing else, just enough money for that, to continue being a nobody.

But here he was, the cold somehow managing to poke a finger through his overcoat, soaking like water through the leather of his shoes, embedding itself in the bones of his feet. And here he was with the good-natured jangling in his ears and the smell—spice and fruit and the hot greasy waft of fast food—and the light-

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strewn darkness of late afternoon.

Here he was on the twenty-second of December, brought to Vienna to provide Franz Kaufman with an early Christmas present, the death of Carlos Luna. He wondered if that would find its way into their account of the Yuletide dream. "We spent Christmas in Vienna, and a Venezuelan drug dealer got killed for selling cut-price cocaine, but apart from that it was so beautiful, you couldn't imagine."

They could have been saved the upset, too. Bailey had suggested killing him in Caracas, but Kaufman had been insistent. It had to be in Vienna because it sent the right message, that it wasn't safe to come over here and work with the Russians. Kaufman didn't want a turf war either, though, which was why he'd paid for Bailey, someone who'd disappear quickly and leave no trail.

By this evening, Luna would be dead, Bailey flown, the status quo restored, no one around who could possibly point the finger. Franz Kaufman would be free to enjoy his own dream Christmas, surrounded by his perfect family, attending Midnight Mass, his conscience no more troubled than a man who'd missed an occasional Sunday service.

Bailey reached Luna's hotel, a place for business rather than tourism, but even here, a Christmas tree took centre stage in the lobby and a Muzak rendition of "Silent Night" was omnipresent, as if it was in the air, a sickly nerve agent designed to overcome the last possible stronghold of resistance.

The lobby was busy and Bailey passed through it without anyone appearing to notice him. He was in the lift before he realized how relieved he was to be out of the cold. He loosened his coat and took off his gloves, did a dummy run with his hand, reaching inside to the gun.

As he walked along the corridor to Luna's room, he took the key card from his pocket, the one Kaufman's people had given him. It wasn't as if he'd needed it, but Kaufman was one of those operators who wanted everything done his way or not at all. So Bailey used the key card, opening the door, walking in on Luna as he was midway through undressing. He could hear the shower running and quickly checked the bathroom, but they were alone.

Luna was standing there in the middle of the room, baffled but unconcerned, a short chubby guy in his underwear, a neatly clipped moustache and such a mop of dark hair for a man of his age that Bailey had to wonder whether it was dyed or a wig. He made to speak but stopped short as Bailey pulled the gun. Everything made sense now and Luna took a step back, looking desperately compliant as he lifted his hands. Bailey kept the gun on him as he walked over to the window and took a couple of swift glances to see how it opened, an operation he carried out mostly blind,

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keeping his eyes on Luna, who was beginning to look confused again.

Bailey wanted to tell him that this wouldn't have been his method of choice, that he was merely following the orders of his client. The cold air slapped hard into his back, though, reminding him that there was little point explaining anything to Luna. It didn't matter.

He walked over, put the gun against the back of Luna's head, the barrel nestling there in the thick matting of hair on the nape of his neck—it wasn't a wig, he could see that now, could see one or two grey hairs, too. Luna was shivering, either with fear or because the room temperature had just dived into an area of the mercury neither of them was used to.

Bailey grabbed him by the arm and thrust him toward the window, the pressure of the gun barrel probably providing more leverage than his own muscle. By the time Luna realized what was happening, it was too late. He tried to dig his heels in like someone miming a tug-of-war, but Bailey had too much momentum behind him.

Luna had been silent until now, but as he reached the window he clawed at the frame with one hand, and at one of the heavy blue curtains with the other, then started to mutter a desperate rosary of pleas, in Spanish, German, Russian—a hopeless attempt to cover all the bases of the people who might want him dead.

Bailey kept the gun firmly against Luna's head and used his free hand to prise his fingers from the curtain. He gave him one more firm push and he was gone, screaming a message into the Vienna night. Then there was nothing, back to silence. Bailey waited a second for the obligatory shocked scream from the street below.

By the time he left the hotel, a huddle of people had gathered around the body. The initial shock had ebbed away, and they were discussing the object in front of them with astounded faces, expressing shock now rather than feeling it. They were looking from the body to the window high above, back again, clearly speculating on whether he'd fallen or jumped, or maybe been pushed.

Bailey glanced down at the splayed body as he passed. A raw corpse was rarely an attractive or dignified thing, but he had to acknowledge to himself that Luna's unsightly and partly naked body was a less dignified sight than most. Kaufman would be pleased about that.

He didn't linger, hardly breaking his stride, but as he walked away a commotion broke out behind him. He guessed one of the people standing there had made a derogatory comment about the man on the ground, voicing what many of them were probably thinking. But a young woman started to remonstrate with them, in German at first, spilling into Australian-accented English as

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her anger overcame her. "How dare you," she said. Bailey stopped and turned. He couldn't see her properly, but the small crowd looked startled in their body language, no less so than if another body had fallen amongst them.

"How dare you!" Some more German and tears, and then, "This is a human being! This man probably has a family—have you thought about that? Kids. He probably has kids!" The crowd shifted uneasily at the outpouring of emotion, one or two people even walking away.

Bailey could see her now, a young woman in a ski jacket, jeans, a woollen hat, standing alone, defiant in her grief for the complete stranger who lay before her. Her cheeks were ruddy with the cold and ran with tears, but she looked fierce and strong somehow, standing her emotional ground, daring them to question the truth of what she felt.

A man standing nearby put a hand on her shoulder, but she knocked it away and spoke harshly to him in German, an outburst that left Bailey thinking this was the person who'd made the initial comment. She was crying again, but nobody seemed sure what to do, afraid to comfort her, but not wanting to leave.

Some of them started to look around, perhaps hoping for the approach of sirens, officials who would take the burden from them and free them to return to their Christmas preparations. When the sirens came they could begin to forget, reducing the death of Carlos Luna to a counterpoint, something to set against the wider happiness of their lives, something to make them thankful.

She wouldn't forget, though, Bailey could see that. This would be woven into the fabric of her life, one more thread adding to the strength and richness of who she was. He didn't know any of this; she could be just a person in shock like the rest of them, but he sensed it to be true, and it made her compelling.

He knew what he should do right now. He knew that the time had come to walk on, to remove himself from the scene. It was only a short walk to his hotel, a taxi ride to the airport. By this time tomorrow he'd be home again, the heat working back through him, the salt air in his lungs.

He knew all of this as though it had been programmed into him at birth: It was time to go. Yet he stood, captivated, and when he moved, it was back toward the group. For the last day and a half he'd wanted only to be out of Vienna, but suddenly he was blind to that, blind to everything but the girl in front of him.

He edged around the body, the half-dozen or so people making way for him, and then he was standing before her and she was looking at him with a mixture of hostility and puzzlement. She didn't know what he wanted and nor did he, but he held out his hand, palm upturned.

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"There's nothing you can do. Please." A couple of the others spoke under their breath, one obviously asking the other what he'd said. The girl looked down at the body again, and at the hand that waited on hers. Like a drunk, thinking slowly, she finally lifted her own gloved hand and put it in his and allowed him to lead her away.

Bailey was walking down the street with her, their hands still clasped through a double layer of gloves. He didn't know what he was doing, where he was taking her, just that he wanted to take her away from there. "You've had a shock," he said. "Let me get you something to drink."

She didn't respond at first, but then she pulled her hand from his, stopping as she said, "Why are you doing this?" She wasn't aggressive now, just unsure why a stranger should care.

"I don't know," said Bailey. What reason could he give her? That he felt responsible, that he'd been drawn to her in a moment of weakness? He could imagine that for years to come he'd dwell on the reasons for what he'd just done, and that even if he never saw this girl again after tonight, he'd dwell on the memory of her, too, the what-ifs, the maybes.

His answer seemed to satisfy her, anyway. She smiled and started to walk again, leading the way to a cafe a hundred yards away. It was busy, full of coffee warmth and smoke, but most of the customers appeared to be Viennese, the tourists probably all back in their hotels now, preparing for the evening ahead.

She took her gloves off inside the door and then pulled her hat off. Her hair was mousy, tousled from the hat, her eyes green, skin fair, still red on the cheeks from the cold. Bailey stared at her face for too long, transfixed by it, as if he hadn't noticed how attractive she was until she'd performed the conjuror's trick of removing the hat. She looked bemused by his attention, not troubled, and said, "Wanna sit down?" He nodded and they found a small table against a wood-panelled wall, taking off their coats.

Bailey noticed her looking at his suit, the shirt and tie. She was wearing a patterned sweater, red and white, and he wanted to tell her this wasn't what he usually wore, that he was more casual than this. He couldn't, though. Of course he couldn't.

"What's your name?"

"Bailey . . . Scott."

"Scott Bailey?"

"No, Bailey Scott. It causes a lot of confusion."

"So your name's Bailey?" He nodded and she said, "I'm Sarah. Thanks for what you did back there, Bailey. I was so upset, I didn't know what to do."

He felt embarrassed, queasy, too, being thanked like that when she didn't know what he'd really done. An awkward moment crept

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between them, the moment when he was meant to say it was nothing, or that he could understand how upset she'd been, things he couldn't say because he didn't want to lie to her.

Then the waitress arrived at their table, all tension shed as they ordered—a hurried look at the menu, a brief consultation as if they'd done this a hundred times before—both of them deciding on hot chocolate. The waitress smiled, taking them for a couple, perhaps, certainly never coming close to imagining the truth, that their sitting together here was linked to the siren hovering uncertainly in the distance.

Sarah heard it, and the sound seemed to drag her thoughts back over there, weighing her down as she said, "What do you think happened?"

He shrugged, but feeling he needed to offer up at least some response, he said, "Someone died. That's all that matters."

She nodded sadly, then rallied and said, "Do you live here?" Her tone was hopeful and he wondered if she was lonely.

"No, just here on business. You?"

"I'm teaching English here, for a year." He smiled but didn't know what to say next and felt awkward again. She seemed oblivious, though, and said, "So I guess you live somewhere hot?"

"Bermuda. How so?"

"The tan. And you don't look very comfortable in that collar and tie, so I'm figuring you're not used to wearing a suit."

"You should be a detective." He loosened his tie and undid his top button. "I can't wait to get back. I don't do cold, and I really don't do this whole Christmas thing."

"You're kidding!" She looked mockingly outraged. "Bailey, it's the best thing about being here. I'd take this over Christmas on the beach any day. Don't you think it's amazing?" She sounded incredulous, her excitement making him smile and feel good.

The drinks arrived and Bailey invited her to convince him, listening as she talked about the Christkindlmarkt, hot chestnuts, Gluhwein, the magic of it all. She was in love with everything that left him cold about it, but it sounded different coming from her: true, possessed of an honest enthusiasm.

And he liked to listen to her talk; there was a warmth and familiarity in her voice that made him feel as though they'd known each other a long time. He'd managed to take her mind off the event that had brought them together, but in the process he'd also let it slip from his own thoughts.

It came back to him only when she interrupted herself to say, "When are you leaving?"

The question hung there for a second, Sarah waiting expectantly. When was he leaving? "Now" was the answer. He had to leave now, to fly out this evening, that was the deal. Once Luna

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was dead, he was meant to get out of Vienna. And there was no sound reason for that not to be the answer. He'd met a girl under the worst possible circumstances for both of them. He liked her, found her attractive. He'd liked other girls, though, and he couldn't put his finger on any particular reason why this one was different, why it was worth taking the risk of upsetting Kaufman and staying an extra day.

It was crazy, anyway, because nothing could come of this. He'd stay an extra day, perhaps, they'd get to know each other better, the attraction growing stronger, but he could never tell her the truth. It was wrong, he knew it instinctively, it was wrong to stay, for every reason imaginable, but he wanted to, even with the cold and this Christmas theme park of a city, and the risk of angering Kaufman. He wanted to stay.

"My business is done. I was thinking of flying out tonight."

She picked up on the ambiguity and smiled as she said, "You mean, you'd stay longer if you had a reason to?"

"Maybe," he said, smiling too.

"I have to go to dinner tonight, with the principal and his wife. Tedious, but I can't get out of it. I'm free all day tomorrow, though. Don't know if it's enough reason to stay, but if you're willing to give it a go, I reckon I can win you over to the whole Christmas thing."

"Okay."

"No way!" She looked amazed by the speed of his response, as if she'd never believed he'd agree to it, and, checking herself, she said, "Don't you have anyone to get home to?" He shook his head. "I mean, like family. Don't you go home to your family for Christmas?"

"No, it's just me." He could see she wanted him to explain, but he didn't want to because he knew how the bare facts of his upbringing sounded, like a case for sympathy, and it hadn't been that bad. He'd known his mother, which was more than some people did, and his uncle had looked out for him. He'd been lucky enough, had landed on his feet—no one needed to feel sorry for him about that.

"So there's no rush," was all she said. As if reminded by the words, though, she checked her watch and said, "But I need to get going. Where shall we meet?"

"How about here at eleven?"

"I'll be here." He stood up with her as she put her coat back on, but didn't put his on yet.

She thanked him again as she was leaving, but he got the feeling the tragedy she'd witnessed was already being overwhelmed in her thoughts by the excitement of meeting someone new. He hoped so, anyway, because that was how he felt, and for all the insanity of it, he wanted his reason for staying here to be a good one.

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He strolled back to his hotel after another twenty minutes. Like she'd said, there was no rush, but in the back of his head a timer was counting down the minutes to the departure of his flight. When it reached zero, he knew another timer would start, one that with every passing minute would add to the tension and paranoia of Franz Kaufman.

He played cautious by eating in his room, thinking of this girl he hardly knew who was sitting, at the same time, having dinner with her boss and his wife, perhaps thinking, in turn, of him. He thought of her when he woke, too, his eagerness to get on with the day causing him to let his guard slip by going down for breakfast.

He'd have been found in his room anyway, but he kicked himself as he saw Kaufman's sidekick walking towards him across the breakfast room. It was the guy he'd dealt with from the start, blond and pale enough to frighten children. He'd never told Bailey his name, referring to himself only as "Herr Kaufman's associate."

He usually had a couple of guys with him but he was alone this morning and looked like he meant business. As he sat down opposite Bailey he said abruptly, "Why are you still here?"

"It's Christmas. I thought I'd do some shopping."

"Funny," said the sidekick, as though he'd read the word at random from a set of cue cards. "You leave today. Herr Kaufman will not tolerate deviation. The order was to leave directly."

"Herr Kaufman worries too much." The sidekick looked furious and Bailey was pleased now that he'd come down for breakfast; if he'd been in his room he supposed he would have just earned himself a smack in the mouth.

"Time's short," was all he said, putting his anger to one side. "The police were given a description. They're looking at security footage from the hotel." Bailey was about to state the obvious, that the description could only be vague, that the lobby had been swarming with identikit businessmen, but the sidekick added, "There's a plane at thirteen-hundred hours. Be on it." He got up and walked away, his unnatural paleness drawing glances from a couple of the other guests.

Bailey had no reason to fear the police, he was certain of that, but if he stayed around much more than a day, he could have serious problems with Kaufman and his people. He'd move to a different hotel, get some casual clothes, buy himself the time to see what there was between him and Sarah, or what there might have been had they met in a different way, in different lives.

When he got to the cafe she was already there, smiling broadly as he approached the table and saying, "I got here early. I didn't wanna miss you or . . ." He looked questioningly. "I didn't want you to change your mind and leave."

"Why would I do that?"

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"I don't know." She looked into his eyes, just for a moment but searchingly. "Why would you stay? You don't even know me."

He shrugged, shaking his head as he said, "I saw you standing there shouting at those people and I just wanted to talk to you, find out who you were."

She smiled, but grew serious. "It was on the news. He was a drug dealer."

Bailey nodded. "It doesn't change any of the things you said about him."

"Guess not." She didn't look certain. She pointed at his sweater then and said accusingly, "Is that new? It looks like you've just bought it."

He laughed in admission. "I didn't have many casual clothes with me."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an offshore-banking consultant. It's not interesting."

"So why do it?"

He hesitated, stuck for an answer, but smiled then as he realized she was teasing him.

They had coffee and she asked him about Bermuda, then about his boat. Her family had a boat, too, and for a while their conversation turned to their mutual love of the sea and they lost sight of the Christmas conversion that had been his excuse for staying. There was time for that. For now they were wrapped up in getting to know each other, as much as they could, anyway. She seemed to know instinctively that there was little point asking about his family and, as if to compensate, she covered hers in a cursory fashion—her father a TV producer, mother a lady who lunched, sister a lawyer.

They concentrated instead on the things they could share—the sea, books, films, life in general—their conversation finally turning back to the city around them, to her love for it, and her determination to open his eyes to what it offered, Christmas and all.

They stayed in the cafe for lunch, time running away from them, and when they stepped out into the early afternoon the sky already had the first hint of darkness threaded through it. This extra day had seemed like a big risk, and already it was feeling too short a time, the clock moving too quickly.

She led him to the Rathauspark, throwing him right into the festive deep of the Christmas market, a determined fairy-tale atmosphere that was like drowning in syrup. It didn't trouble him today, though, because he was seeing it through her, entering into the spirit of it without thinking too much about what it all meant or how fake or ephemeral its sentiments were.

They drank Gluhwein and sat on a bench to eat hot chestnuts, keeping the cold at bay. It was growing dark by the time they

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walked on, the lights in the trees creating a strange sense of insularity and warmth. And a little further on they came to a small area where people were waltzing to music that was tinny at the edges.

They both laughed, but then Sarah said, "Let's dance."

"I don't know how to waltz." He didn't even know how to dance, really, but he wanted to be able to.

"Nor do I. So who's gonna report us?" It was in the tone of her voice, asking him what they had to lose. They'd make fools of themselves, but who'd see them? He glanced around, confirming just that to himself, that no one was watching.

They danced in their own fashion, and through all the padding of their winter clothes he felt drunk just being able to hold her. They received smiles, too, from their older fellow dancers, smiles such as the waitress had given them, the goodwill that people who'd run the race felt toward a couple they perceived as just starting out.

It made him feel good, and at the same time he felt as though he were bleeding internally, a steady dripping away of his life force. He could fall in love with this girl, was perhaps already falling. Maybe she felt the same, but it could still go nowhere. It was an uncharted area of the heart for him, and for good reason, because he was a murderer—because he didn't deserve it.

Kaufman's sidekick was right: Time was short, and his orders had been to leave. He should never have gone against those orders, but he was here now and he was hooked and it was hopeless. He could see no way of this leading to a happy outcome, but he was happy, nevertheless, and wanted to hold on to it for as long as he could.

As the evening set in, they left the park and found a traditional beer cellar where they drank and ate, sitting in a corner booth and looking out as the quiet bar filled with people and noise and slowly emptied again. It was as if they were detached from the world, moving inside a private time and space.

When they left he said, "I'll walk you home."

"Bailey, honestly, it's too far out of your way. I'll be fine."

"Where do you live?"

"Near the Prater."

"I could use the walk, and I'd feel happier."

"Bailey, it's a safe city."

"I know," he said, but they were already walking and she'd linked her arm into his.

The city centre was busy, a seasonal sense of euphoria swelling over the crowd, but their course took them almost immediately onto quieter streets down to the river. They stood on the bridge for

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a while, looking at the darkly illuminated water below, and she explained that it wasn't a river, just the Danube Canal.

Finally they reached her building and she stopped and said, "Wanna come in?" He did, but he didn't want her to think that was why he'd walked her home.

"Not tonight. Do you have any plans for tomorrow?" She shook her head. "Same time, same place?"

She laughed incredulously and said, "You're staying?"

"If you don't mind."

She shook her head, looking into his eyes for a second or two before she said, "I've had a really great time today, Bailey."

"Me too." He leaned in and kissed her, the warmth and the taste intoxicating, the taste of the evening they'd shared, and something of her, something good.

Walking away afterwards, he felt stupid with happiness, foolishly romantic, like the lyrics of one of those old songs, blind to the reality of the world, the cars passing, other people. It was a feeling that lasted till he reached the bridge, and then it crashed spectacularly.

Coming in the opposite direction was one of the guys who'd tagged along behind Kaufman's sidekick—an ape, rented muscle. Bailey kept his cool, face forward, hoping the guy wouldn't recognize him, but he cursed his bad fortune. It was a small city, not easy to hide in, but it was still unlucky to run into one of them.

At first the ape seemed preoccupied, maybe a little drunk, but in the final seconds as they crossed, Bailey spotted a twitch of recognition. It would take him another few seconds, another few steps, to place him, but he'd do it and then Bailey would be in trouble.

He turned, catching a backward glance from the ape, who looked panicked at having been spotted himself. Bailey walked after him, trying to look inconspicuous but aiming for one thing in particular, to catch up with him by the time he reached the steps that led down to the side of the canal.

Another backward glance and the ape started to run without much conviction that he was up to it, a man out of shape. Bailey broke into a run, too, figuring the drivers of the passing cars would be paying little attention.

He saw the opening in the bridge wall where the steps were situated and picked up more speed, cutting out wide before swinging back in and giving the ape a hard body blow to the side, knocking him through the gap and down the steps, running down after him.

The ape had fallen down a dozen steps or more but recovered himself quickly and half scrambled, half fell down the rest. He reached the bottom but was disoriented and lost in the deeper darkness down there. Bailey jumped the last steps towards him and hit him hard, knocking him down. He got on his back, then,

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and twisted his head firmly. The ape yelled out, but his neck didn't break, more muscle in there than Bailey had given him credit for. He dug deeper, tightening his grip, straining with the effort. More yelling and then the sickening crack he'd been aiming for.

He stood up off the man, catching his breath, and looked around quickly before rolling him into the canal, the body forming an indistinct shadow on the waters before disappearing. Bailey couldn't move for a while, just stood there engulfed by the noise of the water and the more distant traffic, disgusted with himself because this had been his fault. Yet even now, he knew he wouldn't turn back. He was like a junkie, addicted after one hit, knowing that he'd do anything, risk anything, to spend one more day with her. And he was determined to focus on the moment but couldn't shake the truth that there was nowhere for them to go from here.

It left him conflicted the next morning, happy to see her but pained that she looked as happy to see him. Every touch, from the kiss with which she greeted him to her hand on his as they sat at their table, made him feel he was betraying her further. Maybe it showed, too, because more than once she asked him if he was okay, and he lied, telling her he hadn't slept.

When they'd finished lunch she said, "Come on, I wanna take you to the most amazing place in Vienna, and it has nothing to do with Christmas." The temperature had fallen further and they walked quickly, taking only ten minutes to reach an irregular cobbled square, the space dominated by a large pale concrete block in the centre.

"Is this it?"

She laughed at his response to it and said, "It's the Holocaust Memorial."

"A concrete block?"

"A concrete block. You need to move closer." They walked towards it and he saw now what it was, a concrete cast of a library, a subtle truth brutally declared, daring anyone to question its message.

"It's beautiful," he said, and it reminded him of her, of the way she'd been the other day over the body of Carlos Luna.

"Isn't it! The way we're locked out of it forever." He nodded, saddened, but before he could dwell on it she said, "The Christkindlmarkt closes at five today. We should get going." He nodded again, and they walked on, Bailey wondering if she sensed it, too, that they didn't have much time.

They strolled through the Rathauspark the way they had the previous afternoon and he was desperate to recapture the fuller sense of escape he'd felt then, but the place had a sinister edge now, the smiles of strangers harder to read, the clock ticking louder, faster.

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The ape's body had probably been fished out of the canal, and for all Bailey knew, the news of how he'd died could already be out there. Beneath the sugar-frosted surface of this city there was another, darker world, the one that had brought him here, and it was stirring restlessly even as he tried to focus on the make-believe of his relationship with Sarah.

They danced again, more comfortable in their lack of accomplishment, but it was harder to imagine himself alone with her. His eyes were drawn instead to the people standing about, with a constant sense that somewhere among them was someone who'd recognize him, who'd report back to Kaufman that he was still in Vienna.

He felt he'd trapped himself, been lured into danger by an impulse that was self-destructive. For a few hours, a day or so, she'd made him feel as though he were someone good and decent, but he wasn't, and now he felt hemmed in on all sides by the masquerade.

As the night progressed, the city turned giddy around him, as if they were on a merry-go-round, with Sarah the only thing clearly visible, her face and her words, her warmth, the taste of her when they kissed. Everything else was descending into a confusion of light and noise, threatening faces emerging one after the other from the darkness.

Even in the ultimate feel-good theatre of Midnight Mass, he felt he was being watched. For all he knew, Kaufman himself was at the same service with his wife and children, untroubled by his own hypocrisy. Bailey couldn't feel like that. He wanted to be away from there and was relieved to be back out in the cold again at the end of the service, back in the empty streets that led to her apartment.

She asked him inside when they got there, and this time he went, following her up the stairs, standing in silence as she opened the door and ushered him in. She showed him into a large lounge, lit by two small lamps, the walls lined with bookshelves.

"Make yourself comfortable." He took off his coat, dropping it on the edge of the sofa, sitting down then. "How about a drink? Got some great schnapps, it's like cough mixture, but it's fantastic."

He laughed and said, "Okay," and she walked into the kitchen as she took her gloves off, coming back a minute later with two small glasses.

She handed him the drink as she sat next to him and said, "Merry Christmas, Bailey."

"Merry Christmas." They touched glasses and drank, the taste hitting him with a shudder that made them both laugh. It was good, though, medicinal but good. "I bought you a present," he said, and reached into his coat pocket, handing her the small packet.

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"Me too." She got up and crossed the room, coming back with a parcel. "You first."

He opened it and smiled, saying, "*A Christmas Carol.* Are you trying to tell me something?" Her mouth dropped open, on the verge of laughing, but shocked, too.

"Bailey, I swear to God that didn't cross my mind! No kidding, I got it for you because it's one of my favourite books."

"I know. It's great." She smiled and opened the package he'd given her, taking out the pendant inside. She stared at it for a short while and he felt uneasy, that she didn't like it, or that it was too extravagant a gift from someone she'd known only two days.

But she looked up then and said, "It's beautiful," and leaned over and held him. They kissed, their mouths still hot with the medicine taste of the schnapps. They kissed for a long time, and when she finally broke away it was to say, "You wanna go through to the bedroom?"

It wasn't even a question, because they both knew it was what they wanted, but he hesitated and she saw it, a look of confusion taking over her face. He wanted to, but he knew he couldn't, that he'd already stored up enough hurt for her, that it was time to end the lie.

"I can't," he said, his voice regretful, quiet.

Beyond the confusion he could already see the first signs of self-reproach, a familiar voice telling her that she should have known, that this had been too good to be true. It pained him, because she'd never believe now that he'd fallen in love with her, only that he'd set out to hurt and deceive her from the start.

Latching onto the most obvious reason for that deception, she said, "Bailey, you're not married?" He shook his head but pulled further away from her, taking a deep breath, knowing that it was over, that this window was closing.

"You don't know me."

"I know enough." She was insistent, clinging on to hope, and that made it worse. He shook his head again.

"That man the other day, his name was Carlos Luna, a drug dealer from Venezuela. He was selling cheap cocaine to a Russian gang. A local crime lord wanted him killed."

"What does that have to do with anything?" It didn't take her long to answer her own question, though, and she backed away from him, recoiling as if the mask had been torn away, revealing him for what he was. "You've gotta be kidding me!"

"Everything else I told you was true, except my job. I'm a contract killer."

She made a noise like she'd been winded, tried to speak but couldn't, three or four aborted attempts crumbling away between

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them. She started to shake her head, crying now, and he wanted to comfort her but knew it was impossible, that she wouldn't allow him to touch her again or speak, even to say he was sorry.

And he *was* sorry, more than he'd ever been for anything—but relieved, too, that he'd surrendered the truth. It was his bad luck, that was all, to have seen a glimpse of the person he might have been; there were no magical transformations, though, no new beginnings.

She got up and walked to the door, opening it, standing tense, coiled tight, not looking at him. He nodded, picked up his coat, and walked out, and as the door closed behind him he couldn't help but think of her on the other side of it, weeping perhaps, full of hatred, feeling violated.

He fastened his coat as he walked down the stairs, put his gloves on as he emerged into the street, and started walking. He didn't feel cold, the numbness he felt inside leaving him immune to it. And he was only half aware of the deserted street, the breeze laced with ice, the car approaching quietly from behind.

The car approaching from behind. He heard one of its doors open. His instincts kicked in, but he didn't have the will to act on them. He knew who it was and what he needed to do, but suddenly it hardly seemed worth the effort, as if he couldn't see what he was meant to be saving. He was a nobody, and it was no longer enough.

He walked, waiting for the hand on the shoulder, but instead he heard the surprised cough of a silencer, felt the punch in his back, the damp warmth of blood soaking into his shirt. His step faltered, and he was only half aware of the car sliding up alongside him, its boot open.

He weakened and started to fall, but someone caught him under the arms, pulling him toward the car's open boot. He couldn't see anyone, neither the man dragging him nor the driver, and then he realized he couldn't see anything, only a blank, and for a moment he thought he could hear the sea.

The car had gone when Sarah came running out, and no one was there to see her shivering as she looked up the street, puzzled, perhaps, that he could have disappeared so quickly. No one was there to speculate on what she might be thinking, on what had brought her after him.

Even now, faced with the dark emptiness of a Christmas morning, she seemed reluctant to go back. She walked a few paces in the direction he would have taken, on her toes, protecting her stocking feet from the worst of the cold paving, and there was no one to tell her that if she kept walking, she would find a few isolated spots of his blood on those same cold stones, no one to tell her of the heart from which that blood had fallen. ●

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A Ticket to the Moon

by Donald Olson

With storms bearing down on much of the country this time of year, many of us dream of holidays in far-flung places. An author from a very snowy region of upstate New York, Donald Olson has always had a yen for travel, and he writes persuasively about characters willing to risk it all for a chance to trot the globe. The protagonist of this new story is just such a woman; the predicament she gets herself in is one only he could concoct. †

Never before having taken a long trip, Maura returned with a deep-seated feeling of anxiety that something dreadful awaited her, a vague fear that something must have happened in her absence to destroy that wonderful sense of escape from reality which had given her such intense pleasure for the past fortnight. Was it possible she might not somehow be brought to account for what she'd done?

What calamity could she have anticipated? That the police would be waiting to arrest her? That having lived a dream for ten incredibly marvelous days she was to be plunged into a nightmare of disgrace and ruin? As if the possibility still existed, the gnawing presentiment of disaster remained with her as she moved through the rooms of the big house on Westminster Drive, finding everything as she had left it, except for the house seeming emptier, ominously silent.

Before unpacking, she sat down at the dressing table in Mrs. Vandermolen's bedroom and, after regarding herself in the glass with one last lingering wistful smile, she carefully removed her employer's silver-blond wig, her diamond earrings, her pearl necklace, and put them all away. Before removing her makeup, she slipped out of the Mainbocher suit she'd worn since disembarking from the cruise ship, hung it in the closet, and donned her own ancient terry-cloth robe.

Thus ended the dream, the vacation from reality, the daring, insane masquerade. The plain, somewhat too heavy features of Maura Small, housekeeper, now stared back at her from the mirror. The dream-scarred eyes reflected now the wistfulness of

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regret—but not of remorse. Guilt? Yes. Fear? Perhaps. But never remorse.

"Dear God," she said aloud, "you must have been mad. To dream about doing it, fine, but actually to have done it . . . Mad, mad, mad."

But already the adventure was acquiring the aspect of myth, fading into unreality. As if to remind herself that it had actually happened, she took from her bag the folder of snapshots she'd had printed in Hamilton just before leaving Bermuda and studied them with an air of incredulity and wonder, feeling a sudden warmth as she came to *his* picture. Troy Zachary posing with casual grace beside the hotel pool. Lissome brown body, perfect white teeth, the bluest of blue eyes, the blondest of blond hair.

That she had not anticipated, never in her wildest fancy. Escape, yes; adventure, yes; but never the romance. Candlelight dinners, pleasant excursions in a horse-drawn cart, hours reclining side by side under a striped cabana on the white sand beach.

She'd had, perforce, to play the role of a lady of mystery, the lonely widow allowing herself to be diverted by a young man's attentions, letting him do most of the talking while she revealed only bits and pieces of the life of Caroline Vandermolen. And when they'd said their farewells on the pier in New York, she had firmly but politely discouraged his suggestion that they keep in touch, perhaps to arrange a dinner or luncheon date in the city. Maura was prepared to live for the rest of her life on the memory of those divinely rapturous days.

It was not hatred of Mrs. Vandermolen that had driven Maura to do what she'd done, unless envy is a form of hatred, for how could one hate so sweetly vague and undemanding an employer, despite her whims? Maura had worked for her for twenty years before something long repressed in her nature, perhaps the sudden maturing of some gene inherited from a renegade ancestor, had ignited that spark of rebellion. Or perhaps it was the awareness of having reached a climacteric beyond which the possibility of anything happening to change her life appeared utterly hopeless.

Maura tidied up the bedroom and retired to her own small room at the end of the hall, where she felt safer, more like her rediscovered self. She tucked the envelope of snapshots away in her bureau drawer, all but the one of Troy Zachary, which she slipped beneath her bed pillow. She fell asleep that night ignorant of the knowledge that any violent emotional upheaval, like the eruption of a long-quiescent volcano, bears consequences impossible to escape.

It was while she was engaged in cleaning the silver, a sense of guilt and betrayal producing the need for constant activity to distract her mind, that the doorbell rang. Smoothing her prematurely

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graying hair and adjusting her glasses, which she had refused to wear in Bermuda, Maura went to answer it.

Upon opening the door, her consternation could not have been greater had she beheld in the flesh the vengeful image of her employer. Maura recoiled, her hand flying up as if to hide her face from those smiling, bluer-than-blue eyes.

"Hello. My name's Troy Zachary. I wonder if I might see Mrs. Vandermolen."

The shock of not being instantly recognized was almost as riveting as the shock of seeing him. The ensuing awareness that anyone seeing her as herself might not immediately connect her with the elegantly dressed, artfully made-up blond widow brought only a momentary flash of relief.

Still with her hand hovering about her face, Maura replied breathlessly that she was sorry, sir, Mrs. Vandermolen was not at home. "She's away—out of town—on a trip—to Morocco."

"Morocco?" The blue eyes expanded in baffled disbelief, and then, as he stared hard at Maura, the bronzed features froze. "My God! It's *you.* It is you, isn't it?"

Maura's hand dropped heavily to her side. She felt as ashamed as if he'd discovered her naked. "Hello, Troy."

"Caroline? I don't understand. What are you playing at?"

"You'd better come in."

She led the way into the living room, feeling nothing but a cringing sense of humiliation. She waved him to a chair and sat down on the sofa. "I'm not Caroline Vandermolen. I'm Maura Small, her housekeeper."

His face was still a mask of confusion. "I'll be double damned."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry? What does that mean? Where is Mrs. Vandermolen?"

"I told you. Away. On a trip."

"To Morocco?"

"Yes."

He continued to regard her, most disconcertingly, with a mix of scepticism, reproach, and sardonic amusement. "How very interesting, Miss—Small? Perhaps you'd care to explain."

Despite acute embarrassment, Maura could not deny that Troy's presence was producing the same effect it had had in Bermuda. She sighed, made a gesture of hopelessness. "What's to explain?"

"Everything."

"I work for Mrs. Vandermolen. I've been her housekeeper for twenty years. She travels a lot. She has a passion for faraway places. So do I, only I never had a chance to visit any of them. Well, this time I did. I just made up my mind that while she's away I *would* go someplace. To Bermuda, on a cruise. And not as Maura Small, housekeeper. I'd saved money from my wages. I

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made believe I was her. I wore one of her wigs, her clothes, her jewels. And I just went. That's all."

"That's all?"

Maura blushed. "I—I never expected to meet anyone. I mean, anyone like you. That just—happened. I'm sorry I deceived you."

The blush, or the apology, produced a softening of his expression. "You're not short of pluck, love, I will say that. You really had me fooled."

"But why are you here? I told you not to try to contact me. I never gave you my address."

"The phone book did. Believe me, I had no intention of chasing after you. I was going to be held up for a few days in New York on business. Not knowing anyone in the city, I thought, Why not pop up and surprise Caroline? Frankly, I hoped I'd be invited to stay for the weekend. God, what a joke."

"Not a very funny one, is it?" Maura said miserably. "I really am sorry, Troy. You can't stay, of course. Not under the circumstances."

A wryly speculative look came into his eyes. "How long will she be away?"

Maura hesitated. "She'll be back any day now."

"I assume you didn't plan to tell her about your little—escapade?"

"Are you *kidding?* She's nice enough in her way but, oh Lord, she'd fire me on the spot."

"In other words, it's our little secret?"

"It has to be."

Zachary gazed approvingly around the expensively furnished room. "Quite a layout, eh?" He admired the chinoiserie breakfront. "Nothing like old silver. Some lovely porcelain, too. And those baubles you were wearing in Bermuda weren't from the five-and-dime. Your employer must really trust you if you have access to them."

"Why shouldn't she?"

His smile teased her. "I won't answer that."

"I didn't *steal* from her. I only borrowed her things. Just that once. It didn't harm anyone."

"Oh? What about me? I invested quite a tidy sum in that Bermuda jaunt."

Maura frowned. "Invested?"

"Wise up, honey. I hope you don't think I make a habit of sucking up to rich old bags for my amusement. Come on, Maura, you're not really shocked. And I've had enough experience to know you didn't mean it when you said you couldn't see me again. I had a pretty strong hunch Mrs. Vandermolen would give me a warm welcome if I showed up on her doorstep."

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Maura had virtually no experience, but there was nothing wrong with her instincts; she knew he wasn't joking.

"Then you *did* plan to come here. It was all an act. All that charm. You were only pretending."

"Don't knock it, so were you. Funny, eh? Like an old Cary Grant movie."

Maura bridled, unconsciously imitating Mrs. Vandermolen at her most indignant. "I was a perfect lady. I never led you on."

"Maybe not with words, but your eyes were a dead giveaway."

"I said I was sorry, which is more than you've done."

He made a mock bow. "My humblest apologies, madam. So what do we do about it?"

"Do about what?"

"Giving me a room for the night. And don't worry, *I'll* be a perfect gentleman."

Maura felt a burst of panic. "You can't stay here. This isn't a hotel."

"Relax. Your boss lady isn't coming home tonight."

"Look, Troy—"

"No, you look. I think we can do each other a good turn. Square the account, so to speak. You're all alone here, right? Big house. No close neighbors. How's the security system?"

"What are you saying?"

Resuming his survey of the room, he assumed an air of charming cajolery. "Simple to fake a break-in. All those goodies just waiting to be plucked."

Maura sprang up. "Are you out of your *mind?*"

"Not at all. And don't get in a tizzy, love. I'll tie you up before I leave tomorrow—not too tightly. When I'm well away I'll call the cops and report a burglary. Kid's play."

Desperately, Maura looked toward the phone. A reflex action which he, too, knew was meaningless.

"Need I remind you," he said, "what would happen if the boss lady found out about your—vacation? Impersonating her, using her name, her clothes, her jewels? You'd be out on your ear, with no references."

Maura looked pleadingly into those beguiling but ruthless blue eyes. "How can you look the way you do and be so beastly *mean?*"

"Not mean, love, practical. So stop whining. I'm not going to hurt a hair on your head. Now suppose you show me to my room like a good girl. What time is breakfast?"

Maura waited until she heard the shower running before moving quickly to the phone and starting to pick it up, again purely a reflex action, knowing she would not touch the dial. A visit from the police was the last thing she wanted. Instead she turned out

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the lights and went up to bed—but not to sleep, only to count the hours until dawn, dreading what the next day would bring. Sometime in the middle of the night she rose and quietly padded along the hall to one of the guest rooms, paused, listening, then softly opened the door. The light of a full moon illuminated the room where he lay sleeping. Above the rumpled sheet what she could see of his naked chest and shoulders looked overly massive for the chiseled delicacy of his features. Her gorge rose at the sight of him sleeping so peacefully; he hadn't even bothered to lock the door, could safely take her compliance as much for granted as Mrs. Vandermolen always had, as everyone always had. Sweet little Maura, such an angel of obedience.

She thought of that wickedly sharp carving knife in the kitchen drawer. Serve him right if she were to stab him where he lay. Instead she crept into Mrs. Vandermolen's bedroom, picked up the phone, and dialed a number.

At breakfast Troy Zachary munched his toast and sipped his coffee with an air of lazy, bland detachment, telling Maura how lucky Mrs. Vandermolen was to have such an efficient *servant.* Oh, she could cheerfully have killed him on the spot for that remark.

"I'm sure she'd hate to lose you, love, but she won't, will she? Because you're going to do just what I say. We'll begin by taking an inventory of all the portable goodies. Sooner it's done, sooner you'll be rid of me."

Maura bit back a retort, said only: "We can't."

"What do you mean, can't?"

"Fake a robbery. We can't have the police coming here."

"Why not? You're a damned good actress. You proved that in Bermuda."

"That's not what I mean. It's too risky—the police. They'll ask too many questions. They'll poke and pry into everything."

He calmly spread marmalade on another slice of toast. "So who cares?"

"You don't understand."

"Understand what?"

"It's what they might find."

Zachary wiggled his free hand. "Like my fingerprints? I'm not that dumb."

With a violence that startled him out of his air of indifference, Maura shoved back her chair and leaped up. "You're not dumb? You're about as dumb as they come. Do you seriously believe I would ever have dared pull that Bermuda stunt if things were as I said they were? Sure I was fed up with being taken for granted by that hoity-toity bitch. All those years of devoted service. Devoted *slavery.* She was going to dismiss me! Oh yes. For no reason. For no *real* reason. Just a whim. She was a creature of whims, that

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one. I wasn't supposed to be here when she got back from Morocco. Only she didn't go to Morocco. She went for a trip, all right, but it wasn't to Morocco."

Zachary stared at her, the half-eaten slice of toast forgotten. Then he grinned cockily. "Very good, love. Do I applaud now or is there more?"

"You think I'm lying?" Maura crossed to the sink and pulled open a drawer beneath the counter, removed a wide-bladed carving knife, turned to face him with a ghastly smile. "This is what I used to send her on her trip. You're lucky I didn't use it on you last night. I was tempted."

His lips tried to frame a smile. "What are you trying to do, scare me?"

"Oh, you've nothing to be scared of. You didn't do it. I wish to God I hadn't. She made me so *mad.* I just lost control. It was awful, awful. All that blood. But the worst part was how to—what to do afterward. I had to hide her body until I could decide what to do next." She dropped the knife onto the table. "All I could think to do was to stuff her body in one of her big steamer trunks in the basement. Only it wouldn't fit. I had to—had to make it fit. I had to use the knife again."

Zachary rose slowly from the table as she spoke. His eyes seemed to Maura not quite so blue now, as if the irises were gradually filling with blood, becoming darker, muddier against the growing pallor of his skin. "You're putting me on," he muttered. "*You?* Do something like that? Never."

Maura looked down at the knife. "I still can't believe I did do it. But I did. And then I didn't know what to do next and I couldn't bear to stay in the house with her down there. I had to get away. I had to get away to think everything out. That's when I decided about Bermuda. It was wonderful, heavenly. It was as if I'd bought a ticket to the moon and left the world behind. For ten days I could pretend it never happened. Only I had to come back and she's still here and I don't know what to do. I can't just leave her down there. When she doesn't come back from her trip, people will start asking questions. They'll come here looking for her."

Maura picked up the knife. "Troy, please, you've got to help me get rid of her body. Bury it, maybe. Or take it away somewhere, hide it where it'll never be found. I can't wait any longer. Someone keeps calling on the phone. A friend of hers. A man. He's already wondering why he hasn't heard from her. You must help me, Troy. You were so sweet in Bermuda. I don't for a minute believe it was all an act. You really liked me. *Me.* Not her."

His eyes kept shifting from hers to the knife in her hand. "Maura, this is crazy. You don't know what you're asking."

Yet he seemed to have lost the will to resist as Maura urged him

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toward the basement door. As she opened it, a current of stale, damp air rose from below.

At that moment the phone rang. Maura uttered a sharp cry. "Oh God, who can that be? Maybe it's him again. That man. You wait. Wait right here."

She hurried into the other room and snatched up the phone, listened for a moment, murmured a few words. When she returned to the kitchen, Troy Zachary was hovering with an air of badgered uncertainty near the back door. Maura rushed to shut the basement door, locked it, and pocketed the key.

"It was the police!" she cried. "That man, her friend, I think he's been on to them. I *knew* he was getting suspicious. They're coming out here, Troy. You must help me. You must tell me what to do."

With the evaporation of all that spurious charm, an actual physical change seemed, in Maura's eyes, to have altered Zachary's appearance, and not for the better.

"Sorry, love, I'm not getting mixed up in anything like this."

"But *Troy*—"

Before she could say more, he was through the door, not bothering to shut it behind him.

Maura returned to the living room, dialed the phone. "Sorry, Ethel, it was only the gas man."

"Maura! What the dickens is going on? You tell me not to call you for ten days because you'll be off visiting your sister in Ridgeway. Then you wake me before dawn this morning with some nonsense about it being absolutely imperative that I ring you without fail at precisely ten o'clock. Have you been *drinking?*"

"No, dear, nothing like that. It's a long story. We'll get together on my day off. I'll try to explain."

"It was all quite, quite fabulous," purred Mrs. Vandermolen as Maura fussed with the tea things. "Although I must confess, fainthearted creature that I am, I was a teensy bit apprehensive when Babs insisted we venture into the native quarter. And wait till you see the snaps. Babs on a camel. *So* amusing."

Maura agreed that Morocco must have been a thrilling experience. Mrs. Vandermolen reached out and patted her hand. "Poor Maura. Maybe one of these days I just might surprise you and send you off on a little adventure of your own. I'm told they have some very nice bus tours to the Poconos."

Before that happens, thought Maura, they *will* be selling tickets to the moon. ●

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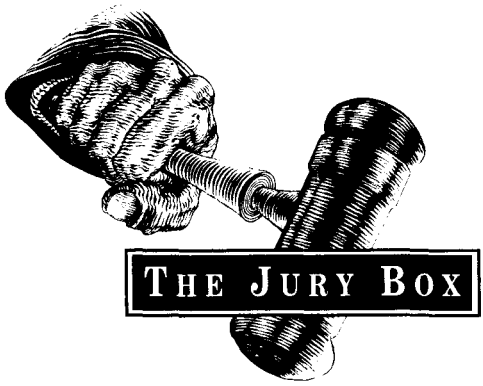

by Jon L. Breen

Though he won a Gold Dagger Award for *Popcorn* (1995), the novels of English comedian and playwright Ben Elton are not as widely known in the United States as they should be. British slang and cultural allusions may have discouraged major U.S. publishers, but the targets of his biting satire in two recent books—TV reality shows and the drug legalization debate—are hardly foreign to Americans.

***** Ben Elton: *Dead Famous,* Black Swan/Trafalgar, $12.00. The earlier novel, first published in 2001, is extraordinary both as pure entertainment and as an incisive look at the foolish impulses that characterize its times. In a touch reminiscent of Pat McGerr's *Pick Your Victim* (1946), it is not revealed until page 207 of 382 which of ten contestants locked in a house for a *Big Brother*-type program has been murdered. Though some of the subject matter would have repelled Agatha Christie, this is a closed-circle whodunit in her tradition, with a solution as delightfully elaborate as anything out of the puzzle-loving 1930s but characters and situations indigenous to the 21st century.

**** Ben Elton: *High Society,* Bantam UK/Trafalgar, $24.95. A Parliamentary backbencher introduces a quixotic bill to legalize all recreational drugs in Britain. Elton considers all aspects of the drug culture via a large cast, displaying a superb ear for varieties of speech and finding dark humor in a very serious subject. The theme —that contemporary public affairs are too often driven by personalities rather than serious consideration of the issues —is hard to dispute.

**** Keith Ablow: *Psychopath,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $19.95. In a fourth case as thought-provoking as it is suspenseful, forensic psychiatrist Frank Clevenger's antagonist is a contemporary variation on Dr.

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Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The reader alternates between recoiling in horror at the Highway Killer's murders and cheering his caring and brilliant treatment of his psychiatric patients. (The novel is also available in a very effective six-hour abridgment read by the author [Audio Renaissance, $25.95].)

**** Helen McCloy: *The Pleasant Assassin and Other Cases of Dr. Basil Willing,* Crippen & Landru, $27 hardcover, $17 trade paper. Only the first two of the ten short stories about psychiatrist sleuth Willing (all in *EQMM* between 1948 and 1979 as originals or reprints) have previously been collected. One of the greatest American classicists, with a devotion to fair play comparable to Christie, Queen, and Carr, McCloy deserves a fresh audience. (Someone should reprint the best of her novels, too.) B.A. Pike summarizes her career in a thorough introduction.

*** Peter Tremayne: *Smoke in the Wind,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Sister Fidelma, 7th-century Irish advocate visiting the kingdom of Dyfed while en route to Canterbury, looks into the murder and possible rape of a young village girl and the *Mary Celeste*-style vanishing of all the inhabitants of a small monastic community. A strong entry in a fine historical series.

*** Gene DeWeese: *Murder in the Blood,* $25.95 hardcover, $13.95 trade paper. Small-town Midwestern Sheriff Frank Decker investigates a vanished local history buff, a wealthy patriarch who throws money at family skeletons, and a young serial vandal who makes taunting phone calls. A skilled veteran better known for science fiction than mystery, DeWeese beautifully interweaves myriad plot strands in a book with a large cast of involving characters.

*** Dean Koontz: *The Face,* Bantam, $26.95. The chief of security for a Hollywood star, the actor's precocious ten-year-old son, and a pernicious anarchist are the central characters in a 608-page supernatural detective story as enthralling as it is preposterous. Humor and an uplifting conclusion alleviate the darkness. Among other things, this is a Christmas ghost story, though not publicized as such. Other yuletide mysteries follow.

*** Karen Harper: *The Queene's Christmas,* St. Martin's Minotaur/Dunne, $24.95. In the best of the holiday entries at hand, Elizabeth I seeks the murdering prankster draining the joy from her 12-day celebration. The plot, prose, and characters are well managed, but the best feature is the detailed description of 16th-century Christmas customs, including period recipes for roast peacock, mince pie mangers, wassail, figgy pudding, and other delicacies.

*** Henry Kisor: *Season's Revenge,* Forge, $19.95. Was a powerful elderly resident of rural Porcupine County, on

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Michigan's Upper Peninsula, the victim of a bear attack or of murder? Combining nature writing, local color, romance, historical oddities, and sound detective work with a pleasant dose of holiday sentiment, the first case for Deputy Sheriff Steve Martinez heralds a promising new series.

** Joanne Pence: *Two Cooks A-Killing,* Avon, $6.99. Chef and food writer Angie Amalfi goes to the Napa Valley wine country to cook dinner for the Christmas reunion show of the famed nighttime soap opera *Eagle Crest,* one of whose cast members died mysteriously eleven years before. It's surprisingly readable and entertaining, considering that the plot and characters are totally unconvincing and Angie comes off as a shallow twit. There's plenty of Christmas sentiment, though the action takes place in April—TV, you know.

Editor Ed Gorman's good holiday story "The Christmas Kitten" (*EQMM,* January 1997) is one of three reprints in the anthology *Kittens, Cats, and Crime* (Five Star, $25.95). The eight originals include winners from Edward D. Hoch, Brendan DuBois, Mat Coward, and the team of Christine Matthews and Robert J. Randisi.

Two original anthologies from Mystery Writers of America (Berkley, $23.95 each) offer excellent value. *Blood on Their Hands,* edited by Lawrence Block, leads off with Brendan DuBois's admirably tricky "Her Last Gift" and has strong entries by Tom Savage, Rhys Bowen, and Marcia Talley, whose "Safety First" explores various possibilities for murder in a public library. *A Hot and Sultry Night for Crime,* edited by Jeffery Deaver, begins strongly with the editor's intricate "Ninety-eight Point Six" and ends with Carolyn Wheat's brilliant hippy-commune whodunit "What the Dormouse Said." Among those in between are fine tales from David Handler, Ronnie Klaskin, Sinclair Browning, and G. Miki Hayden, with the disturbing World War II reminiscence "War Crimes." Hayden, along with Mat Coward (one of the most consistently original short story writers since Stanley Ellin) and Jeremiah Healy (with solid cases for his Florida private eye Rory Calhoun), contributes to both volumes.

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Art by Allen Davis

Crime in Store

by Tim Heald

Doctor Tudor Cornwall, Reader in Criminal Studies at the University of Wessex, could find no precedent for this classic Christmas crime.

On consideration, it wasn't the Christmassy aspect of the affair that was significant. That was a snowscreen like everything else. The crime could have been committed at any time of the year whatsoever. Easter bunnies would have been just as effective, or Halloween witches; any kind of fancy dress would have sufficed. It reminded him of the Mardi Gras Murders—that extraordinary sequence of rituals in Rio which remained unsolved to this day. They were one of his most popular seminar subjects and the basis of a particularly brilliant Ph.D. thesis he had overseen the previous year.

The most embarrassing aspect to this new business was that Tudor himself had been a witness to the event. He had been duped like everyone else. Still, it was not often, as a mere academic, that he could actually claim to be present at the scene of the crime. His stock in trade was very cold trails indeed. There was usually not a

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whiff of a scent, false or otherwise, by the time he came to investigate murder or mayhem. So this eyewitness affair was something he should be able to work up into a useful lecture to set aside his existing Yuletide special, an analysis of Conan Doyle's "Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle."

The invitation had said the event was in aid of charity, though no charity had been specified, which should perhaps have aroused suspicion. But at this time of universal goodwill and good cheer one's sense of suspicion tended to be dulled. As an expert, he should have known better, but even experts lower their guard occasionally. Nor was there an RSVP on the invitation. The card just said, "Champagne for Christmas Charity," and asked Tudor to come along to Santa's Grotto at Bottomley's to drink freely and give generously. Perfectly plausible. So was the advice that he would be allowed in only if dressed as Santa Claus.

In the interval since Tim Heald last contributed to *EQMM*, he has been absorbed in editing several anthologies, among them the Folio Society's four-volume compilation of "all-time great crime stories." He has just completed a full-length novel, *Death and the Visiting Fellow*, featuring Dr. Tudor Cornwall, the character he introduces to us in this new story. The book is soon to be released in the U.K., but is not yet contracted for publication in the U.S. ¶

It was years since he had been in Bottomley's, and he certainly hadn't seen it since the venerable store had been acquired by Barnaby Ming Po, the Shanghai billionaire playboy. He was reminded of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* a set text for this year's "Special Subject Paper" on Victorian Crime Fiction. What was it Dickens wrote? "Lavish profusion is in the shops: particularly in the articles of currants, raisins, spices, candied peel, and moist sugar." There was certainly a lavish profusion of currants, raisins, spices, candied peel, and moist sugar in Bottomley's Food Hall on the morning of the Champagne for Christmas Charity. What else had Dickens said about Christmas in Cloisterham? "An unusual air of gallantry and dissipation is abroad." That was it. And he had gone on to say that this air was "evinced in an immense bunch of mistletoe hanging in the greengrocer's shop doorway." Some things never changed. Just such a bunch was hanging at the entrance to Santa's Grotto, and under it all manner of Santas embraced and canoodled, for the white whiskers concealed both men and women. Tudor remembered that there was a state in the American Midwest which made it a criminal offence for a woman to venture out of doors disguised as Santa Claus. Looking at all the gallantry and

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dissipation on display under the mistletoe, he wondered if the state didn't have a point.

It was, of course, impossible to be sure who anyone was that morning at Bottomley's. Some of the red and white outfits looked like Armani and others simply off-the-peg. There were hand-me-down beards and manicured Truefitt & Hill or Trumper jobs and one Santa was sporting what looked suspiciously like his own. Tudor thought it might have been the famous novelist who was president of the Detection Club, but was not sure enough to ask. Besides, they had had a serious contretemps on the subject of "Fingerprinting in the British Raj" on very late-night television and had not spoken since. One or two other Father and Mother, Brother and Sister, Daughter and Son Christmasses looked vaguely familiar, but Tudor was not in the mood for penetrating their disguises. That was too much like work.

As it transpired, the guests included almost every known figure in the respectable criminal world: policemen, criminologists, forensic pathologists, mystery writers, crime correspondents, and academics like Cornwall himself. Even the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police himself, Tudor's friend, Sir Andrew Warburton, had been seduced into Santa's Grotto, his better judgment blurred by the chance to do some anonymous last-minute shopping. Buying presents for his mistress without arousing the suspicions of his wife and secretary was one of the commissioner's recurring problems.

The press had not yet rumbled the fact that the commissioner himself had been present at the scene of the crime. Tudor Cornwall, on the other hand, was among the first to be "outed." The daily messages from "Santa" to the national press combined outrageous ransom demands with challenges to the alleged "experts." Santa wanted millions of pounds for the safe return of Bottomley's owner, but he was also having a lot of fun taunting such people as "the so-called professor of crime at the University of Wessex." Tudor wasn't actually a professor, but simply "Reader in Criminal Studies," but neither Santa nor the tabloid press had time for such nice distinctions. "Professor" made it a funnier story.

"Bottomley's Boss Snatched Under Crime-Prof's Nose." Everybody likes laughing at mad professors.

"It's not actually very funny," said Warburton. "My men have better things to do than trying to find a dubious foreign national who's lucky to be allowed into the country—let alone interrogating anyone found wearing a white beard and a red suit."

"No clue about what happened?"

"You saw what happened just as well as I did." Warburton sounded snippy. "There was no reason to suspect foul play. It just looked like a stunt."

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"Ming Po didn't look very happy about it at the time. . . ." said Tudor forlornly.

"Entirely consistent with the abduction being a joke," said the commissioner. "If he'd been laughing uproariously as he was carried off by a hit squad of Santa Clauses we'd all have smelled a rat. As it was, he just looked as if he were hamming it up. Plausible, very."

"And they drove away in his own car?"

"Which we found abandoned in South Kensington together with four discarded Father Christmas outfits. We have an eyewitness account of an unmarked white transit van driving away from the site."

"I'd make unmarked white transit vans illegal."

The commissioner smiled ruefully but said nothing.

"Is it true that 'Santa' has asked for a million from Manchester United?" asked Tudor.

"Man U, the Chinese Government, the Prince of Wales, the National Lottery, Chris Tarrant, Elton John . . . it's becoming a long list."

"Based on what?"

"Perceived wealth. A residual connection. Ming Po has an entertainment facility at Old Trafford, he's still a Chinese national, he has an organic window box. That accounts for the first three. It's scattergun. Santa's after money from anywhere."

"Has the family been targeted?"

"Oh yes. Mabel Ming Po's had messages. And the parents in Shanghai. They're happy to fork up, but it won't be enough on its own. Santa's looking for serious dosh. Trouble is that he's playing the Robin Hood card. All the demands are for charity. He's robbing the rich to pay the poor. And the abduction had a certain spurious style. People have fallen for it. Public opinion is on Santa's side. We're on a loser."

"You've no idea who the Father Christmas gang really are?" Tudor was beginning to have suspicions, but he was not about to share them. He was private enterprise. Warburton was government-controlled. Never the twain . . .

"Could be the IRA. Or Gaddafi's mob. Or the Countryside Alliance. No real clue. You know what it's like, Tudor—thank the Lord most people don't realise how easy it is to pull off a scam like this. Otherwise everyone would be at it. Frankly, we're grasping at straws. Santa's got us by them. Short and curly ones."

"You can't have short and curly straws," said Tudor, "but I know what you mean. Is Santa issuing deadlines?"

"Christmas Day seems to be the cutoff," said the commissioner. "If the money's not up the chimney or on the sleigh by the twenty-

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fifth of December, then Barnaby Ming Po is cold turkey. If you get my drift."

"Do we care?" Tudor wanted to know. "Does anyone care? People die. Fact of life. Barnaby Ming Po is a rich, high-profile celebrity. He dies. We notice. But he's just one of us. A tiny statistic. A grain of sand. Even Mabel would get over it. Her inheritance would sugar the pill."

"Oh, come on, Tudor," said the commissioner. "I'm not one of your students and this isn't a seminar. This is real. You know the problem. You know the issue. I have to get this sorted. Jobs on the line. Reputations at stake. Not easy."

"It's not an orthodox crime," said Tudor, "and with the greatest respect, you and the Yard don't do UNorthodox very well. How many Santa Claus outfits did you say were found in the Ming Po limo?"

"Four."

"And how many kidnappers were there?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. There must have been a couple of hundred Father Christmasses in the grotto that morning. It was impossible to tell who was doing the kidnapping and who was just joining in the fun."

"Which is part of what makes the whole plot so fiendishly cunning. Did your eyewitness in South Kensington say anything else?"

"Difficult to be entirely sure. They're a Kurdish couple. No English to speak of. I've had a Kurdish constable question them, of course, but she seems almost as confused as they are. Not surprising, really. I mean, you don't expect a group of Santa Clauses to drive up in a Rolls Royce, take off their kit, and get away in a van."

"Did they realise they were watching a crime?"

"No more than we did. They thought someone was making a film, which is pretty daft, as there was no sign of a camera. I'd say they were totally unreliable. The wife even had some story about one of the men putting *on* a Santa Claus outfit rather than taking it off."

"Hmm," said Tudor. "Can I see these people?"

"I don't see why not," said the commissioner. "We've let them go, but they live somewhere in North London—Willesden, Neasden, somewhere like that."

Tudor seemed thoughtful.

"Tell me something," he said. "Barnaby Ming Po's been having a run-in with the so-called British Establishment ever since he got here, hasn't he?"

"You could say that."

"So it's in his interest to make the said British Establishment

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look an ass? Particularly the police . . . Wasn't there some row over parking tickets? And one of your people picked up his aunt on a mistaken-identity thing at the airport?"

"No mistaken identity about it. She was in possession of a large quantity of an illegal substance. We were fantastically diplomatic about it. Let her go in the end. Pressure from the Foreign Office. The Chinese kicked up a fuss. You're not supposed to know about it. How did you find out?"

Tudor smiled. "You forget that it's my business to know things like that," he said. "And now, if you'll forgive me, I'm going to go and interview these Kurds."

Which he did. They turned out to be perfectly charming and to speak conspicuously better English than the commissioner alleged. They also stuck to their story, such as it was.

After he had finished, Tudor called in at the theatrical outfitters from whom he habitually hired fancy dress and other disguises. He wanted a repeat order from the previous week, so there was no need to try it on. It was late afternoon by now, so he went back to his London club and phoned Bottomley's from his room. He got a few bars of "Jingle Bells" played on a tinny xylophone. This was followed by an interminable recorded message with innumerable press-button options. Twenty minutes later he had established that, despite the tragic disappearance of their boss, the staff at Bottomley's were carrying on business as usual, there would be late-night shopping, and Santa would be in his grotto as per usual. Tudor smiled and put another call through to the cell phone of his favourite Fleet Street crime editor.

"Gus," he said, "it's Tudor here. If you can get round to the front hall of the Senior Service in half an hour I can promise you a scoop."

"Actually, Tudor, mate, I'm a bit tied up with the Ming Po case . . . Mabel's called a press conference. . . ."

"Half an hour, Gus," said Tudor. "Trust me."

He put down the phone. Gus would come round. He always did. He needed a witness and Gus was more reliable than most.

Tudor changed and then went down to the smoking room, picked up an evening paper, and saw that the front-page headline was "Top Cop Shopped—Met Chief in Grotto Grab." It was Warburton's turn to look ridiculous. The story told how as the ransom demands from the Santa Claus abductor of billionaire store owner and playboy Barnaby Ming Po grew ever more extravagant, it now transpired that among the Father Christmasses thronging the Bottomley's Grotto on that fateful morning was none other than the capital's senior policeman, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Andrew Warburton. The inside leader was headed "On Yer Bike, Sandy!" It did make Sir Andrew look remarkably foolish.

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Even more foolish than Tudor Cornwall a day or so earlier. The editorial finished up, not unreasonably, by asking, "Who next in this guest list of dupes?"

Tudor stroked his beard and went out into the hall, where he was relieved to find a breathless crime editor bustling round the revolving door.

"Jesus Christ," said the journalist, "is this your idea of a joke? Haven't we had enough Santa Claus outfits for one Christmas?"

"Not *my* idea of a joke," he said. "Come on. We'll get a cab and I'll explain."

Twenty minutes later the two men alighted at the main entrance of Bottomley's.

"I think you're wrong this time, Tudor," said the crime editor. "It's too . . . well, it's too bloody *obvious* . . . "

"Had *you* fooled, though," said Doctor Cornwall. "And everyone else. One of the first rules of serious crime: It's the bloody obvious which gets overlooked. And, as in this case, the answer's usually sitting right under your nose. I daresay Mabel's press conference was going to reveal all. However, if I can, as it were, beard Santa in his den, then at least I'll have managed a modicum of damage limitation. Let's go and see if I'm right."

And so they passed the gold-braided and epauletted flunkey on the door, who smiled and bowed slightly in deference to Cornwall's festive alter ego, and continued on into Cosmetics. Tudor, entering into the spirit of the occasion, waved jovially at the pancaked shop assistants standing wanly behind their caravanserai of oils and unguents.

"Are we the two wise men, Gus?" he asked his companion. "Are these the foolish virgins?" And so they tripped on into the food hall replete with greedy punters eyeing its groaning boards of avocados and Armagnac, beluga and brandy, chestnut and chocolate all the way through the gastronomic alphabet to zabaglione and zebra (carpaccio of). And so finally to the giant mistletoe at the mouth of Santa's Grotto.

The yuletide cavern was a riot of elves, pixies, more than seven dwarves, reindeer, bambis, Jacks, beanstalks, Little Red Ridinghoods, ugly sisters, and a fair sprinkling of Joe Public to leaven the leitmotif. And there, as Tudor Cornwall had very much surmised, was exactly what he was looking for.

"Well, well," said Tudor, sitting down in the sleigh at the centre of the Bottomley's grotto where the man in the white beard and the scarlet hat with bells was going, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" at a group of credulous-looking five-year-olds. "An Asian-eyed Santa. Nice try, Barnaby, but the game is finally up." ●

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A Rope to Hang the World

by Edward D. Hoch

When Michael Vlado's wife Rosanna called him in from the horse paddock that Thursday afternoon, he knew it was too early for dinner. What surprised him was that she told him he had a telephone call. The modern world had finally reached the remote village of Gravita in the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps, and nearly every member of Michael's Gypsy clan was now connected by phone. Still, a call from any of them was rare, with their farms an easy walk or horseback ride away. A few, like Michael, had cars, but buggies and wagons still outnumbered motor vehicles.

With his short story sales nearing 900, the ever-versatile Edward D. Hoch has started branching out to a more peripheral area of the mystery field. A series of short whodunits by the MWA Grand Master have been incorporated recently into Who-dun-it? Mystery Jigsaw Puzzles, from Lagoon Puzzles. Collectors of Mr. Hoch's work, and other interested readers, can obtain the puzzles at local department stores. ✝

"Who is it?" he asked Rosanna as he entered the kitchen, where she liked to carve her wooden animals.

"Colonel Segar." She handed him the telephone.

When Michael first knew him he'd been Captain Segar of Romania's government militia. After that government fell with the collapse of the Soviet Union, he became a civilian bureaucrat for a time before returning to a quasi-military post. "Good day, Michael," he said over the instrument. "It is something of a wonder being able to speak to you directly."

"The twentieth century has finally arrived in twenty-first-century Gravita. How is the weather in Bucharest?"

"A pleasant autumn day. I wonder if you could drive down here

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tomorrow to meet a special visitor."

"Who would that be?"

"Marta Swann, a Swiss Gypsy who is vice-president of GIRCA."

"What's that?"

Colonel Segar chuckled, having his little game. "I thought you knew. It's the Gypsy International Recognition and Compensation Action. They claim to represent more than six hundred Gypsy organizations around the world."

"Does she want to meet me?"

"Of course! You are king of one of the most important Gypsy clans in the region. She wants your support."

Michael sighed. Driving to Bucharest for the meeting, staying overnight, and returning the following day would mean two precious days away from his horses at a crucial time for foaling. Still, if Segar wanted him, he would go. After promising he'd be there by midafternoon he told Rosanna.

"More Gypsy politics," she murmured with a shake of her head. "Is there no end to it?"

"I'll be back Saturday night. Otto and Mircea can help with the foaling if you need them."

"I'll be all right." She hesitated and then added, "Be careful."

"Why do you say that? I have taken many much longer trips."

"I had a dream. I have had the same dream for two nights. I do not want to lose you."

He smiled. "Whatever you saw in your dream, I will be all right. I will be careful."

The drive through the foothills the following morning was colorful, with the turning leaves catching the bright sunlight that filtered through the trees. As Michael approached Bucharest, clouds began to gather. Rain seemed on the way, and the first drops hit his windshield as he drove around the Arcul de Triumf near the center of the city. Bucharest might never be Paris, but they were trying.

Colonel Segar was waiting at his new office in the Ministry building. "Sorry to bring you down here in the rain," he apologized.

"It was no problem. We had bright sunshine in the hills." It was some months since he'd seen Segar and his friend had put on weight. "I can see your promotion and new position agree with you."

Segar made an unhappy face. "I am tied too much to my desk. They use me now for ceremonial duties, a certain sign that my best days are behind me. But come, you must meet this woman."

He led Michael through an adjoining office to a large room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the National Theater across the boulevard. A tall, slender woman stood with her back to the

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door, peering at the street scene below her. "Marta," Colonel Segar said. "This is Michael Vlado, Marta Swann."

She turned at once, and Michael was struck by the soft beauty of her face. She had the dark hair and complexion of the Roms, but her features were almost Oriental with their high cheekbones and narrow eyes. She wore a black turtleneck sweater and black slacks that served to set off the luster of her face even more. "I am so pleased to meet you," she said, extending a graceful hand. Her voice betrayed a trace of accent, perhaps from a British university. "Colonel Segar has been lavish in his praise for your work."

"He is too generous," Michael responded. "I am certain your own work with GIRCA is far more important."

"We have had some successes, most recently when a Swiss court cleared the way for our lawsuit against IBM."

"I have heard only vaguely of that lawsuit," Michael admitted.

She smiled. "There is evidence that the company provided punch cards and early computers that allowed the Nazis to organize the extermination of six hundred thousand Gypsies along with millions of Jews during the war. We hope to win a large settlement to finance health and educational projects for European Gypsies."

"There is certainly a need for it," he agreed. "But an American company can hardly be held responsible—"

"That company's founder received a medal from Hitler in nineteen thirty-seven." Her face hardened as she spoke. "European Gypsies live for the most part in a state of poverty approaching that found in sub-Saharan Africa. I know your own clan does somewhat better than that."

"For some reason, Romanian Gypsies seem less nomadic than their brethren," he explained. "Perhaps the area is more suited to farming and horse breeding. Certainly my people can manage a living at it."

"Most countries are not as tolerant of our people as Romania is. I hardly need to tell you what has happened in parts of Germany and the Czech Republic."

Michael nodded. "I've been there. And to Britain, Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, and other countries as well."

"There is no need to impress me with your travels, Michael Vlado. You left out Slovakia, where Gypsy women have been sterilized against their will."

Something in her tone made him turn to Segar. "Are we adversaries here?" he asked. "I thought Miss Swann and I were on the same side."

"And so we are," she said immediately, before Segar could intervene. "You must excuse me, Michael. Perhaps I have been too long in the company of adversaries. I have just come from Slovakia, and my encounters there were not pleasant. When I presented my

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evidence of forced sterilization, a government official told me that if the allegations were false I would be prosecuted for spreading false rumors. If they were true, I would be prosecuted for not taking my evidence directly to the police."

"I will help you in any way I can," Michael promised, just a bit put off by her tone of voice. "What do you want of me?"

It was Segar who answered for her. "There is a Gypsy colony here in Bucharest, headed by a man named Nikolo Zamur. Do you know him?"

"I have met him," Michael admitted, "but that was years ago. An odd sort of man, not too pleasant."

Marta Swann nodded. "That's what I've heard, and I need to meet with him. Colonel Segar suggested you might help." Her voice had now lost its stridency as she tried to shift to a friendlier mode.

He thought about it. "The Gypsy colony in this city stays pretty much out of sight, except for the occasional beggar or street musician. The police don't bother them so long as they don't bother anyone else. Zamur could be anywhere." He glanced at Segar for confirmation.

The colonel chewed at his lip and said, "I may be able to obtain some information for you."

He left them alone for a moment and Marta Swann turned back to Michael. "I'm sorry if my words seemed strong a few moments ago. The plight of the European Gypsies is of great concern to me. I really need your help if you can give it."

"What's so important about this man Zamur?"

"I believe he controls a network of criminals throughout Europe, many of them Gypsies engaged in minor crimes like purse snatching and fortunetelling."

"No one could control Roms to that extent," Michael insisted. "How would he even communicate with them?"

"By the Internet, of course."

He shook his head. "I have never seen a Gypsy using a computer."

"Believe me, they do. Perhaps not in your village . . ."

Michael smiled at that. "The government recently installed our first telephones."

"Well, then, that's a first step. Soon your house will be fully wired and you will communicate via the Internet with other tribal kings across the continent."

"I doubt that day will come in my lifetime. For the most part, we are a traveling people, often illiterate, moving from place to place and crossing borders at will."

Colonel Segar returned then with a slim folder. "Here's what we have on Zamur's whereabouts. He is sometimes seen in the flower

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markets near the public gardens, and may have a financial interest in some of the stalls there. In the past, his frequent companion was a Gypsy woman named Clare Dudesti. He has no arrest record here, but he is a person known to have links to criminal elements, so the government tries to keep track of his whereabouts."

"You have no address for him?" Michael asked.

"We were hoping you knew of one," Marta told him.

Michael sighed. "I can try, if you want to come along. I know some of the flower venders."

"Let us be on our way," she decided at once. Segar helped her don a white sheepskin jacket that came to her waist, nicely contrasting with her black sweater and slacks, and they were off.

"Do you have a car?" Michael asked as they left the building.

"No, the colonel was kind enough to have me picked up at the airport."

"Then we will ride in mine, if you don't mind a few farm odors."

She climbed into the front seat beside him, after he quickly tossed a blanket over the seat to protect her white jacket from stains. "Thank you," she said simply.

They set off for the northern outskirts of the city where the government had made yet another attempt to emulate Paris with public gardens patterned after those along the Champs-Élysées. On the way she asked him about his farm, and his wife.

"What about you?" he asked. "Are you married?"

She shook her head. "I travel most of the year lately. It is no life for a woman with a husband and children."

"Is this a paid position you have with GIRCA?"

"It is, but no one is getting wealthy from what we earn."

The flower stalls were not far from the gardens, and he parked his car at the nearby art museum. Though he ventured into the city only rarely, Michael was well known to the Rom community. A woman wearing a colorful skirt and jade earrings hailed him at once, and he paused to exchange a few words with her. As he introduced Marta, the flower vender chose a perfect late-season rose and handed it to her.

"Thank you, Willa," he said, slipping her some leu notes.

"That's very nice," Marta said, lifting the rose to sniff it.

"Willa, have you seen Zamur around lately?"

She shook her head. "He has sold all his stalls."

"What about a woman named Dudesti?"

"Clare? She works for the rabbit man."

"Where can we find her?"

"He has a stall in the next block. She should be working there now."

The rabbit man was easy to locate. Instead of flowers, his stall

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sold little rabbits in wooden cages, some white, some brown. The rabbit man himself was a hulking presence who sat quietly on a folding chair, a crutch at his side, while a dark Gypsy woman with a mole near her mouth showed off the animals to prospective buyers. The man on the chair seemed to ignore them, and his eyes closed from time to time as if he was dozing. Michael waited until the customers departed and then asked the woman, "Are you Clare Dudesti?"

Her dark eyes, regarding them with indifference until then, took on a sharper look. "Who's asking?"

"Michael Vlado. I am king of a clan up in the foothills, some distance from here. We are searching for a man named Zamur."

"I know no one by that name."

"I think you do," Michael insisted, reaching into his pocket for some currency.

But her dark eyes had gone to Marta, and especially to Marta's sheepskin jacket. "Are you also a Rom?" she asked.

"I am. I have come here from my home in Switzerland to find Zamur."

"I will take you to him," she decided suddenly, turning to the rabbit man, whom she called Bato. She spoke quickly in German, apparently telling him she would return shortly, though Michael missed the end of the conversation. Bato barely moved his head in a nod.

"Where are we going?" Michael asked.

"It is not far."

They followed her across the street, toward the racetrack a few blocks away, but then she turned north and led them to a parking garage in the next block. "Are we driving somewhere?" Marta asked.

"No, no. Up here!" She opened the door to a dimly lit stairwell and motioned them ahead of her. The floor was damp, with a shallow puddle from the recent rain.

Michael realized a moment too late that they'd walked into a trap. As he approached the first landing, something swung at his head from the stairs above. Behind him, he heard Marta scream. Then everything went black.

When Michael regained consciousness, Marta Swann was crouched over him, cradling his head and speaking his name. "What happened?" he asked.

"We were mugged and robbed. That woman stole my jacket and purse. There was a man waiting here and he knocked you out, then went through your pockets. I pretended to be unconscious too, but I saw it all. I was afraid they'd kill us."

He sat up, suddenly aware that he'd been lying in the puddle at the bottom of the stairwell. "Did I fall all the way down after he hit me?"

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"Pretty much. How's your head?"

"Not too good. How could she have had someone waiting here to jump us like that?"

Marta had an answer. "Cell phone. She must have told the rabbit man to call a confederate to jump us in the stairwell."

"Come on! Let's get back there."

"They'll be gone by now," she assured him, and she was right. By the time they reached it, the rabbit man's stall among the flower venders was empty. A nearby Gypsy violinist could offer no help.

Michael guided her to a cafe near the public gardens. "I'm sorry about your coat. It's rare for Roms to steal from their own people." He signaled the waiter and ordered two vodkas.

"Shouldn't we report it to the police? I had a cell phone but it was in my purse."

"I'll call Colonel Segar. That will be much more effective than a simple police report."

When the drinks came he suddenly realized he'd been robbed of all his cash, but Marta had a credit card stashed in her sock. "When traveling around Europe these days you have to be prepared for anything," she told him.

"I suppose so. In my village we barely have telephones and already I am hearing of Gypsies on the Internet, Gypsies with cell phones."

"Perhaps it will be the death of us," she said. "Perhaps our technology will become, as the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay once wrote in an entirely different context, 'a rope to hang the world.'"

"You are a very intelligent woman."

"Intelligence can be gained by anyone who reads a great deal. I find much time for it on plane journeys."

"And what do you hope to accomplish with your compensation action?"

"Only what is due us, for the suffering and death the world has been slow to acknowledge."

Michael telephoned Colonel Segar and a police car arrived for them within minutes. Segar was waiting in his office and he demanded every detail of the robbery. He produced photographs of Gypsy women with arrest records for robbery and prostitution, and they quickly picked out Clare Dudesti, though she was listed under two other names. "That's her," Michael said, tapping the mug shot with his finger, and Marta quickly agreed.

"All right," Segar told them. "We'll get right on it. She shouldn't be too hard to find. What about the man who slugged you, Michael?"

"I never saw him."

"I had a good look at him while I pretended to be unconscious,"

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Marta Swann said. "He was fairly young, clean-shaven, probably a Rom. Perhaps it was Zamur."

But Segar doubted that. "Zamur is middle-aged and bearded."

"Do you have anything on the so-called rabbit man, Bato? He walks with a crutch."

The colonel shook his head. "Gypsy peddlers come and go, but I don't have to tell you that. Will you be staying overnight, Michael?"

"I'll have to, but I don't have a room yet."

"There are rooms at the Luxor where I'm staying," Marta volunteered.

"Good!" Segar said. "Take a room there, Michael, and I'll phone you if we learn anything."

Marta Swann booked a room for him, insisting on paying for it with her credit card since his money had been stolen. They dined in a moderately priced Hungarian cafe across the street from the hotel, filling each other in on their divergent lives.

"What does your wife do all day?" Marta asked at one point.

"She helps on the farm. In her spare time she tells fortunes and carves wooden animals that she sells to a shop in town."

"Wooden animals? How quaint!"

"They're quite good, actually," Michael replied a bit defensively.

They both had the goulash, which was quite tasty, and finished it off with a fancy dessert. Later, as they were leaving the restaurant, Marta suddenly grabbed his arm. "That girl down the block! She's wearing a jacket like mine!"

"Let's go see about it." White sheepskin jackets were not that common, especially in Bucharest. They hurried after the retreating girl and caught her at the next corner.

"Where'd you get that jacket?" Marta asked, grabbing her none too gently while she checked the label.

"Let me go!" the girl shrieked in German. "Take your hands off me!"

Michael joined in. "Listen, this coat was stolen from her just a few hours ago. If you don't want to end up in a jail cell, you'll tell us where you got it."

"I bought it, paid a hundred euros for it!"

"Euros aren't traded in Romania," Marta told her, "and the coat's worth three times that much."

"Who'd you buy it from?" Michael demanded.

The girl, who couldn't have been more than eighteen, looked around for help.

The few passersby kept walking, pointedly ignoring the confrontation. "I don't know her name," she said finally. She described a woman with a mole on her face who could only have been Clare Dudesti.

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"When was this?"

"A couple of hours ago."

"Where?"

"The burned church on Baba Novac Street. People sleep there at night."

"Gypsies?"

"Most are."

"You're going to take us back there," Michael said. "Right now."

"It's dark!"

"You'll be safe," Michael assured her. "What's your name?"

"Freda Hawn."

"Let's go, Freda."

Marta kept a firm grip on the girl's arm as they made their way through the nighttime streets of the city. The Orthodox church on Baba Novac Street, damaged during the 1977 earthquake and later partly burned, remained gutted and unused. The city had never torn it down, preferring to preserve the architectural splendor of its exterior. By night it afforded shelter for the homeless; by day it remained something of a tourist attraction.

But this night as they approached it, the church seemed deserted. There were no voices from inside, and as they entered, the only movement that greeted them was the sudden flutter of a dove seeking a way out of the darkness. "No one's here," the girl said. "Are you satisfied now?"

A portion of the roof was open to the night sky, and as a cloud passed from the moon's face they saw something moving above them. "Michael!" Marta gasped.

There was a quick intake of breath from the girl accompanying them, and then a scream. Hanging there, only a few feet above their heads, was the body of Clare Dudesti.

Colonel Segar was not happy about being called in from home. "What is it, Michael?" he wanted to know. "You've been beaten and robbed, and now you find a body?"

"It's Clare Dudesti, Zamur's old girlfriend. She's the one who robbed us earlier. Marta spotted this girl wearing her coat, and she told us she'd encountered Clare here. We found her like this, hanged from the choir loft." He directed Segar to the teenaged Freda Hawn, cowering in a corner.

Segar questioned her while the crime-scene team took pictures and then checked the choir loft before allowing the body to be lowered to the floor. Finally he walked over to examine the rope. "This is interesting," he said, motioning Michael to join him. His earlier annoyance at being summoned from home had vanished. "Look at the rope."

Michael bent closer in the glow from the police floodlights. The

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rope lacked the traditional hangman's knot. Instead, a metal ring had been woven into one end, with the other end passed through it to form the noose. "I've never seen anything like that," he admitted.

"I have," Segar told him. "It's the noose that was used as a method of execution in Britain until they abolished capital punishment in nineteen sixty-four. It was said to result in faster action and a quicker death when the drop was opened. These old hangman's ropes turn up from time to time, even though they haven't been made in decades."

"What would it be doing here, in this burned-out church? Might it have been a bell rope?"

"No, the killer wanted a fast death and a silent one. He brought this noose to the choir loft and probably lured her up there somehow. All he had to do was drop it around her neck and push her over the balcony railing. He already had the other end tied to a pillar."

"It might be suicide," Marta suggested.

Segar bent to examine the dead woman's hands and arms. "I doubt it. There are recent scratches here, as if she struggled with someone. And there are signs of a struggle upstairs."

"This explains why no one is sleeping here tonight," Michael surmised. "The word must have spread about the killing and no one wanted to be found with her body."

"Most likely," Segar agreed. "Michael, take Miss Swann back to her hotel and get a good night's sleep yourself. I may have some information about Zamur's whereabouts by morning. I'll phone you."

"What about this girl, Freda?"

Segar glanced at the frightened teen. "I'll take her downtown for further questioning. Meanwhile, I am glad you recovered your stolen jacket, Miss Swann."

Once back at the hotel, Marta decided she needed a drink before bedtime, though it was close to midnight. "What a day it's been," she said with a sigh. "And to have it end in a murder!"

"At least you got your jacket back."

She glanced down at it, tossed over an adjoining chair. "That's the least of it." Then, after a moment's thought, "Could that girl Freda have killed her for it?"

"Anything's possible, though I think the use of the noose shows premeditation, not a spur-of-the-moment fight over a sheepskin jacket."

She reached out and rested her hand on his. "I don't know what I'd have done without you to help me today."

"What help? We still can't find Zamur without some information from Segar. And I certainly did nothing to protect you from those muggers."

"Clare's partner in the mugging might have killed her in a fight over money."

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Michael agreed it was a possibility. "We have to find that rabbit man. Almost certainly he phoned her partner to set up the mugging. He must know who it is."

They finished their drinks and he saw her to her room. "Do you want to come in?" she asked, taking his wrist.

"I don't—"

"Hush now," she said softly, and kissed him.

But Michael reluctantly pulled away. "Segar may be trying to reach me . . ."

She tilted her head back to study him. "Later, then?"

"Later," he finally agreed, struck once more by the soft beauty of her face and eyes.

Segar phoned his room shortly after eight the following morning. "I have an address for Zamur. Apparently he's married now and is living out near the airport in a trailer park. He seems to have severed his criminal connections."

Michael jotted down directions to the place. "Will you be questioning him about Clare Dudesti's murder?"

"Certainly, but I want to question some other local Gypsies first. You and Miss Swann can talk to him, if you wish. Give me a report of what he says."

Michael met Marta at her room and after breakfast they drove out to the trailer park in his car. The previous day's rain had left the place pitted with puddles, but now the sun was out and the weather was warming. He thought about his horses in the field.

They parked as close as they could to the shabby trailer with a small red Z painted on the door. A dented Yugo pickup truck was parked nearby, apparently still in operating condition. "This must be it," Marta said.

"Let me go first. I don't know what we might encounter."

The door was opened by a young woman with ringlets of long dark hair and strings of colorful beads around her neck. Except for her hair and jewelry she looked more European than Gypsy. "What do you want?" she asked a bit defensively.

"We have come to speak with Nikolo Zamur," Michael told her. "I am Michael Vlado, king of the Roms in the Gravita area. This is Marta Swann from Switzerland, representing GIRCA, the Gypsy International Recognition and Compensation Action."

"Wait a minute," she said, and closed the door. She returned almost at once and held the door open for them. "You can come in for a few minutes. He has not been well."

The trailer's cramped sleeping quarters occupied the rear portion, and Zamur was seated in a chair smoking a thin cigar. He seemed healthy enough at the moment, though Michael's roving eyes took in a cluster of pill bottles on a table nearby. He recog-

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nized sleeping pills and a blood-pressure medication amid other prescriptions he couldn't identify. He also recognized a shotgun propped in one corner of the trailer.

"Who sent you?" Zamur asked at once. He was a slender man with short whiskers fringing his chin. "I have not been in contact with other Roms since my marriage to Ruth."

The young woman spoke. "I am not a Rom. I was born in Belgrade. Some resented Nikolo when they heard he had chosen me instead of a Gypsy bride. But I have been good for him. The Gypsies he knew were nothing but criminals."

"Colonel Segar supplied your address," Michael told him. "He will be coming out later to question you about Clare Dudesti's death."

"Death?" He seemed genuinely surprised. "What happened?"

"It appears she was murdered. Have you seen her lately?"

He shook his head. "Not since Ruth and I were married seven months ago."

Marta told him, "I sought you out in hopes you could enlist the local Gypsies in our cause. We are seeking reparations for the killing of our people by the Nazis during the Holocaust."

"I have had no contact with my people since our marriage," he repeated. "I was working as an auto mechanic before I developed these health problems. I am exhausted by nightfall, but I need sleeping pills to get a good night's rest."

"Then you can't help us?" Marta asked.

Zamur shook his head sadly. "They are no longer my people, not since I married Ruth."

"Were you both here last night?"

He nodded. "We were here. Neither of us went out. I have not been out in weeks."

"Those Gypsies!" his wife muttered. "I think they put a curse on him."

"Gypsy curses are a myth," Michael told her.

"Not for someone who believes in them," she replied.

Michael knew that was true. He had seen the irrational suffering of those who believed themselves to be cursed by Gypsies. "My friend and I had an encounter with Clare shortly before she was murdered," he told them. "There was a man with her. Any idea who it might have been?"

Zamur shook his head. "There were always plenty of Roms eager to sleep with her. What did he look like?"

"We didn't get a good look at him."

"Then I can't help."

"What about someone called Bato, the rabbit man? He uses a crutch and sells caged rabbits near the gardens."

"He's been around for years."

"Is that his first name or last?"

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Zamur shrugged. "Only name, so far as any of us knew. He loves rabbits, buys and sells them all the time. Makes some sort of living at it."

"Clare was working at his rabbit stall."

"That's probably why she was at the church," Ruth said. "Bato often slept there, didn't he?"

Zamur nodded. "Not a pleasant place, but it provided partial shelter against rain and snow. The police rarely bothered them there."

Michael pressed on. "If Bato isn't at his rabbit stall or the old church, where might we look for him?"

The bearded man thought about it. "Sometimes he sold rabbits near the Dinamo Stadium when there was a soccer match scheduled."

"There's one this afternoon," Marta said. "I saw a sign for it in the hotel lobby. They're playing Turkey."

"Turkey will beat them," Zamur predicted. "It is a much better team."

There was nothing more to be learned at the trailer park, and they drove back toward the city, heading for the stadium. "Do you think he'll be there?" Marta asked.

"I hope so." He glanced at his watch. "I thought I'd be heading home by now."

"Really?"

The streets near the stadium were crowded for the soccer match, and Michael finally parked some distance away. There were souvenir stalls all along Florasca Street, but at first they saw no sign of Bato. Then, as they neared the main gate, Marta suddenly gripped his arm. "Over there! A man with a crutch!"

"That looks like him. Come on!"

It was indeed the Gypsy called Bato. He was just setting up his stall, aided by a young girl who was unloading rabbit cages from a battered van. Michael recognized her at once as the teenaged Freda Hawn, who'd been caught wearing Marta's jacket. "Hello, Freda. I'm glad to see that the police released you."

She sucked in her breath when she recognized them, and seemed about to bolt. Marta calmed her down at once with a few quiet words. "You have nothing to fear. We're here to see Bato."

The hulking old man looked up at the sound of his name. "What do you want with me?"

"You set us up yesterday," Michael accused. "Before we left with her, Clare Dudesti told you to call her partner on your cell phone, didn't she?"

"I know nothing of this," he insisted.

"Either you talk to us or you talk to Colonel Segar. I understand the government can be rough on Gypsy peddlers."

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Bato's lips twisted into something like a sneer, but when he spoke his words were softer. "What do you want to know? Clare is dead."

"We know that. We want the person you called on your cell phone yesterday with the information that we were headed for the parking garage."

A man and his two sons stopped to look at the rabbits, and Bato interrupted the conversation to sell them two of the animals in their little wooden cages. After they went on their way he stuffed the money into his pocket and turned back to Michael. "Constantine Suluku; he's from Turkey. He used to play on their soccer team. That is how she met him."

"Turkey is playing today. Will he be here?"

"Yes. He may be down in the locker room with his old teammates."

"Thank you, old man," Michael said, handing him a leu note.

Bato glanced at it and nodded his thanks. "Be careful. He is a bad one."

"Thank you for the warning."

The visiting team's locker room was beneath the grandstand on the west side. Michael fought his way through the crowd with Marta close behind. "Why are we doing this?" she asked at one point. "This Suluku person will be of no help to my organization."

"But he may be of help in finding Clare's killer."

"That sort is better off dead. She gives all Roms a bad name."

"Hardly anyone is better off dead," Michael said. They found their route to the locker room blocked by a bulky turbaned guard. "We must see Constantine Suluku," he told the man.

"You press?" the guard asked with a grunt.

"That's right," Marta said, trying to get around him.

"No women, men only."

"Fine," Michael told him. "Wait here for me, Marta."

He entered the locker room, filled with half-naked young men changing into their soccer uniforms. Michael understood only occasional snatches of their conversation. He had sold horses in Turkey, but the idioms of the young were sometimes beyond his comprehension.

"I'm seeking Constantine Suluku," he said to one of the players.

"You press?"

Michael nodded slightly and the youth pointed out one of the few fully dressed people in the room. He was tall and slender, with curly black hair and a lithe body. At that moment he was laughing at the remark of one of his old teammates. The laughter stopped as Michael approached and was recognized.

"I think I owe you something," Michael told him. "My head is still sore from yesterday."

Suluku stiff-armed him aside and broke for the door.

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"Stop him!" he shouted, but Suluku's friends ignored him. One actually grabbed him to prevent his pursuit, but Michael shook off the hand and ran after the escaping man.

Outside the locker room Marta was still arguing with the guard. She spotted Suluku as he darted past her. "That's him!" she yelled. "The man who hit you!"

Michael knew he was no match for the younger man, a former athlete, who was already pulling away from him in the crowd.

Then suddenly he was recognized, and soccer fans began crowding in on him, besieging him for an autograph. He turned desperately from side to side, seeking a way out, but there was none. Michael fastened a hand on his tunic collar and pulled him from the mob as Marta came running up.

"Trapped by his own fame," Michael told her. "Let's get out of here."

"What do you want?" the man asked, struggling to get free. "I am innocent!"

"You and Clare Dudesti mugged and robbed me in the parking garage yesterday." He went quickly through Suluku's pockets. There was no weapon, but he found a cell phone that Marta quickly identified as hers.

"I know nothing—"

"Shut up and listen," Michael told him as they headed for the nearest stadium exit. "You know Clare was murdered last night. You were there, at the old church, weren't you?"

"She was alive when I left," he insisted. "I heard about the murder this morning from old Bato."

"Who was there with her?"

"Bato and some others."

"What happened to this jacket of mine?" Marta asked.

He seemed to recognize it for the first time. "She sold it to a kid."

"Clare sold it?"

"Yes. To a girl who helps out Bato sometimes."

"Did you know everyone at the church?"

"Most of them. Some were strangers. Gypsy gatherings are like that."

"They were all Gypsies at the church?"

"Yes, about a dozen of them. Some went to the tavern with me, but Clare stayed."

"Who was with her when you left?"

"No one I knew." They'd reached the street now, and Constantine Suluku asked, "Where are you taking me?"

Michael turned to Marta. "Call Segar on your cell phone. He can have a police car here in five minutes."

Somehow the thought of arrest must not have occurred to him until then. "You cannot turn a fellow Rom over to the police!" he insisted.

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"If you can mug and rob a fellow Rom, I can certainly have you arrested for it. No Gypsy is above the law."

But Michael was no match for the younger, athletic Suluku. With a sudden burst of strength he broke free, pushing Marta out of the way and dashing into the street. "After him!" Marta shouted, already pulling out her cell phone.

Michael leaped over a low fence and ran after the fleeing man. Cars, still arriving for the game, slammed on their brakes. As Suluku tried to run between two vehicles one swerved to avoid him and smashed into a car in the next lane. His escape path blocked, he tumbled over the hood of one car in a vain attempt to keep moving. But now Michael grabbed an ankle and hung on. He pulled Suluku off the hood and onto the pavement as a traffic policeman ran up to investigate.

"Colonel Segar is on his way," Marta said as she joined them. She told the officer, "This man assaulted and robbed us yesterday."

"I didn't kill anyone!" Suluku insisted, struggling again to get free.

The officer attempted to move the car and get traffic flowing again, but one old Russian vehicle had a damaged radiator that was leaking onto the street. Some men pushed it aside and a tow truck was called.

Segar's men took charge of the prisoner. "You do cause trouble for me, Michael," he said, not unkindly. "You are less of a problem up in the hills."

"So is the snow, when it comes," Michael replied. "This is Constantine Suluku, Clare Dudesti's partner in yesterday's attack on us. He may know something about her killing."

"I know nothing!" he spat as he was handcuffed and led away. "I didn't kill Clare, I loved her!"

"What was he doing here?" Segar asked.

"He's a Turkish Gypsy who once played with their soccer team. He came to see his old comrades."

While they talked, a tow truck had pulled up to remove the damaged car. The driver dropped a towrope over the bumper in a somewhat primitive fashion, and it was then that Michael noticed the ring woven into one end. He went over to examine it more closely. "What is it?" Segar asked.

"She wasn't hanged with a British gallows rope. She was hanged with an old tow rope like this one."

Segar shrugged. "They're pretty much the same, I suppose. What about it?"

"I know who killed Clare Dudesti," he replied. "Come on!"

Michael and Marta rode in the backseat of Segar's official car, followed by a police car. When they reached the trailer park near the airport they found Nikolo Zamur dozing in a folding chair by his

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trailer. He opened his eyes, squinting against the afternoon sun, as he heard them approach.

"The police!" he said, half rising from his chair. "Come to arrest a poor Gypsy."

"Just to ask some questions, Mr. Zamur," Segar told him.

The bearded man shifted his sleepy gaze to Michael. "This one was here earlier asking questions."

There was another folding chair opposite Zamur, probably for his wife, and Segar sank into it. "Where were you last night around ten o'clock?" he asked.

"In bed, asleep. I haven't been well."

"Then you couldn't have been at the old church when the Dudesti woman was murdered?"

"Of course not. Why would I kill her? She was part of my Gypsy life. That's in the past."

They had instructed Marta to remain behind them at first. Now she stepped forward, holding the coil of rope.

"Have you ever seen this before?" Segar asked.

"I—don't know."

"Clare Dudesti was hanged with a tow rope, and you were working as an auto mechanic before your illness. You could easily have brought one home with you."

"I didn't kill her."

"We don't think you did," Michael said. "The others would have recognized you at the church. We think it was your wife who did it."

He had forgotten about the shotgun in the bedroom. When Ruth Zamur stepped through the trailer door she was holding it in both hands, pointed directly at them.

"Put down the gun, Mrs. Zamur," Segar cautioned, moving a small step closer to her.

"You're not arresting me. Nikolo and I are leaving here together."

"You killed her because you became convinced she'd put a curse on your husband," Michael said. "You believed the only way for him to regain his health was if Clare died."

"He is better!" she insisted. "This is the first time he's been outside in weeks."

"You made a mistake this morning when you said Clare was probably at the church because she sometimes worked for the rabbit man. We hadn't mentioned she was killed at the church, and you'd had no contact with Gypsy friends who might have told you about it. In fact, your husband seemed quite surprised when we said she was dead."

"Ruth was here with me last night," Zamur insisted.

"Only until your nightly sleeping pill knocked you out. Then she

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was free to drive into the city and find Clare. How did you locate her, Ruth?"

"There were only a few places to look. I missed her the night before, but I found her this time." She was done denying it.

"None of them knew you by sight, of course, and with that hair and the beads around your neck you easily passed as a Gypsy. The tow rope and knowledge of the church as the crime scene pointed to one of you, and only you could have gotten to her undetected."

"The rope was around my waist, under my blouse. I went up to the choir loft after most of them had gone, made my loop, tied one end to the pillar, and called her to come up. When she realized what was happening she fought like a demon, but I got the rope around her neck and pushed her over the railing."

Segar tried to move forward another step but she raised the shotgun. "Get in the car, Nikolo," she instructed. "We are leaving this place."

He stood up, but instead of obeying he walked toward her. "No, no, no, my dear one. You have done what you thought was right, but you have made a terrible error. Clare would never have put a curse on me."

She shook her head as if to clear it. Zamur kept walking toward her, holding out his hand for the shotgun. Segar and the officers were ready to draw their weapons and fire in an instant, but when Zamur's hand closed over the barrel of the shotgun she released her grip without firing. It was over.

"Will you stay tonight?" Marta Swann asked as she reached again for Michael's wrist.

Michael shook his head, remembering Rosanna's dream. "As it is I will not reach home before midnight, but I told Rosanna I would be back today."

"Goodbye, then," she said a bit sadly.

"Where will you go next?"

"Perhaps to Turkey. I may have better luck with the Turkish Rom."

"Marta—"

"Yes?"

" 'A rope to hang the world.' You said that poet Millay had used it in an entirely different context. What context?"

"When I can make of ten small words a rope to hang the world! 'I had you and I have you now no more.'"

He drove into the foothills as day darkened into night, and when he reached their farm in Gravita, Rosanna was waiting up for him. "I knew you were coming," she said.

"Of course. Did you have that dream again last night?"

"No, I had no dream at all. I spent a peaceful night." ●

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I Saw Mummy Killing Santa Claus

by Robert Barnard

"I can't think where food for seven is going to come from," complained Henry Threakleston-Bing.

"Nine," corrected his wife Veronica. "Susan and Gareth have to have Christmas dinner, too." Her husband groaned.

"Yes, well . . . They won't expect more than a small bird, will they? About all *we'll* have."

"Nonsense! The Christmas pudding is made—not quite prewar standard, but quite palatable. We have two ducks, a very good-sized chicken—I've always thought turkey is vulgar and tasteless—and a good sirloin of beef. We shall all do very well."

"We'll have to give the guests first choice. We'll get left with what nobody else wants."

Henry was selfish and a congenital moaner. His wife raised her eyebrows.

"Personally, I'll be happy with any of them. For heaven's sake cheer up, darling. Times are changing. If you can pay for them and have the leisure to go searching, you can *get* things again. Winnie's back in Downing Street, there's a young queen on the throne, and things are looking up for people like us."

"About time, too," grumbled her husband.

"Cheer *up,*" repeated his wife. "This will be a Christmas to remember—for us, and for Jeremy, too. His first Christmas worthy of the name." She turned to the boy, who was just finishing his

In its review of *The Mistress of Alderley* (Scribner, 2003), the latest Robert Barnard novel available in the U.S., *Booklist* said, "Charm and wit, along with exquisite pacing, complete the Barnard formula for a thoroughly enjoyable read." The author's writings about the mystery are also worth seeking out; he has, for instance, recently provided introductions to several Josephine Tey novels reprinted by Scribner Paperbacks. ✝

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breakfast egg. "Got to celebrate the birthday of Our Lord properly, haven't we?"

The boy nodded. He thought they meant Lord Cricklewood, the biggest local landowner. He was always a bit of a snob in later life.

It was quite true that things were beginning to come back into the shops, that ration books were shrinking in size, and "cheese" no longer described exclusively dry mousetrap cheddar. For the first time in his five-year lifetime Jeremy's hunger for sweet things could very nearly be sated.

"You'll be happy to eat dinner in the servants' quarters, you and Gareth?" Veronica asked Susan, her maid, as she helped prepare her for bed.

"Of course, Mrs. Bing," said Susan, using a form of Veronica's name that they had compromised on for quickness' sake. "We'd prefer it."

"I'll make sure it's a good one," drawled Veronica, spraying herself.

No, we'll *make sure it's a good one,* thought Susan, who had a cold and logical mind. *We'll be doing the bloody cooking.*

The next day was the twenty-third, and last-minute shopping was the order of the day. Jeremy was normally a quiet, serious boy (slow, malicious, neighbours said), but now he could scarcely contain his excitement—a quality remarked on many years later when a lady of Soho sold the story of their encounters to the newspaper popularly called *The News of the Screws,* bringing to an end his short political career. The young Jeremy's excitement was fixed on knowing what presents he was getting for Christmas—one, he was sure, was a Dinky Toy, but *which* Dinky Toy?—and he tired himself out daily with anticipation. When he woke up that night at half-past ten he took himself out to the lavatory and saw from the landing his mother, in a low-backed dress and high heels, and his father going through what looked like a pile of bright red blankets.

"They're terribly dusty," he was saying.

"Well, there's no time to wash them now," his mother said. "Even if it were done tomorrow we couldn't hang them out—Jeremy would see them."

"Not if we hung them in the kitchen garden."

"At the moment he's so excited he goes everywhere. And we can't tie him to a table leg."

"Sounds like a brilliant idea to me," said his father.

If Jeremy had only left his visit to the loo half an hour later, he might have seen his mother, standing under Dorleston Manor's mock-medieval wooden chandelier, which hung from its roof down into the hall and was now decked with mistletoe, kissing a white-bearded gentleman dressed in white-edged red robes—kissing him gingerly, it must be said, so as not to raise clouds of dust that might ruin her makeup.

The morning of Christmas Eve was enlivened by the arrival of a

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crate of rather fine cognac, a present from Veronica's Uncle Ernest. "Leaving present from Lloyd's, dear girl," he wrote, "but forbidden on pain of death by my doctors, along with many other good things. Drink and enjoy!"

Henry examined the case and could find nothing to grumble at. It was the sort of cognac he had drunk when he began drinking, before the war.

"Trying to make us feel guilty for not inviting him," he said.

"Nonsense," said Veronica. "Uncle Ernest hates children. It's gratitude for our *not* inviting him."

Christmas Day began with Jeremy's cries of delight (and the odd ominous silence of disappointment when the present did not live up to his expectations). The kitchen bore the brunt of his high spirits, because his parents stayed in bed late to prepare for the labours of the rest of the day. Veronica had bought Henry a magnificent set of golf clubs, property of a nearby aficionado of the game, gone to the great links in the sky. Henry had bought Veronica art-nouveau earrings and bracelet at an ill-attended Sotheby's auction. Old still meant better for the Threakleston-Bings.

Jeremy's presents, as he told Gareth and Susan over and over again (Susan hiding well the fact that she didn't care for children), were only half his store. Santa Claus would be bringing the rest of them personally during Christmas dinner. Major and Mrs. Farnaby were the first of the guests to arrive. Derek Farnaby was an old army pal of Henry's who had bought and become headmaster of a prep school in nearby Peterborough. He knew nothing about boys, and ran the school like a training camp, fitting the boys ruthlessly to the regime and never varying the regime for an individual boy. The prominent lump in Hester Farnaby's stomach revealed that another victim of the major's system could be on the way.

"And what did you get for Christmas, young man?" the major asked Jeremy.

"Sherry? Dry or medium?" interrupted Veronica. She didn't bother to offer gin and tonic. The Farnabys were mixing rather above their level, she thought, and were only invited because Henry insisted on it. It was a waste of an invitation. Jeremy certainly wouldn't be going to school *there.* Susan, taking time off from the parts of the dinner that Gareth was not responsible for, took them upstairs to show them the bedroom where coats and hats were to be left, as well as the guest bathroom. They were on the way down for their sherries when the doorbell went and the Cavendishes arrived.

The Cavendishes were much more to Veronica's taste. Cecily had been presented to King George and Queen Elizabeth at the first Queen Charlotte's Ball after the end of the war. She had married Gavin as soon as he completed his National Service, and his father had died on cue the day after they returned from their honeymoon.

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Accordingly, they had taken over a fine Queen Anne house in Peterborough, and as things had livened up in the early 'fifties they and the Bings had enjoyed quite a lot of "fun" events together. Veronica had detected that Gavin was beginning to lose interest in his wife, and this added to the couple's appeal. Veronica took them through to the estate office, where the drinks had been set out.

"Sherry?" she asked. "Or gin and tonic? And just bear in mind that we've *oceans* of a rather fine cognac for later on."

"And what did *you* get in your stocking, young feller-me-lad?" Gavin asked Jeremy when they all went into the sitting room.

Drinks took quite awhile, because Gareth and Susan were snatching their Christmas dinner below stairs before serving the grander meal in the dining room. For fun, Veronica put on the little maid's hat that Susan always wore when they had guests and went round with bottles. Jeremy had registered that no one was really interested in what he had got for Christmas, but his interest was maintained by the fact that more was to come: He had noticed small parcels being slipped into his father's hands by the arriving guests. He was a watching, if not an intelligent, child.

Dinner, when finally it arrived, went swimmingly. The vegetable soup warmed all the adults up (Jeremy just said "ugh"), and the various meats catered for all tastes and were well carved by Henry, who had plenty of his own preferred duck when he finally served himself. Gareth—he of the Welsh twinkling eyes—pressed steaming silver dishes of vegetables on everyone, and went around with a wine bottle in each hand, replenishing well before more was needed. Jeremy ate chicken and drank his favourite American Cream Soda. People sometimes threw questions at him, but mostly he just sat there watching, and sometimes commenting.

"She's got—" he began.

"Darling, not *she,*" said his mother. "Mrs. Cavendish."

"Mrs. Cavendish's got earrings like Christmas puddings."

Everyone looked. They were circles of gold, flattened at the bottom.

"I suppose they *are* rather like plum puddings," said Cecily Cavendish. "How clever of you to spot it."

"He's remarkable like that," said Henry, who was proud of his son in public. "He sees everything. You can rely on his observation."

This was said of the man who, thirty-five years later, in the dying days of the Thatcher government of which he was a minor member, said to his contact in the press, "She's invincible," just at the time when the daggers were being thrust in. But of course they were metaphorical daggers, and it was only real, corporeal things that Jeremy observed so well.

When the pudding had been tasted, Jeremy's father said he would have to fetch more wine. Jeremy pointed out there was some in one of the bottles, but Henry said, "That won't go far." Five minutes later

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a figure entered the dining room, exuding bonhomie and dust. He didn't actually say, "Ho ho," but he rubbed his hands, felt into his sack, and said: "There's a young man here that I've got presents for!"

"Me!" shouted Jeremy.

Some of the presents were a disappointment, especially the *My First Spelling Book* from Major and Mrs. Farnaby, which had all the hallmarks of a publisher's free sample. But Jeremy, under his mother's cold gaze, just said, "Thank you very much," and went on to the next package. And his presents didn't end the show. Santa dived into his sack again and drew out three identical packages. "To make it a really happy Christmas," Santa said, giving one to the major, one to Gavin Cavendish, and one to Veronica. "Let's see who can drink theirs first!"

When the guest had disappeared to his waiting reindeer, Henry returned to be told by Jeremy he had missed Santa. He just said he had seem him often enough in childhood. The packages were opened and the excellence of the brandy commented on by the visitors. They were less happy when it became clear that they were expected to consume their own bottles for the rest of the day, but still it *was* a good brandy, and a generous gift. The major inwardly vowed that his wife in her condition could drink none of it, that he would be abstemious, and that he would take most of it home for late-night consolation against the trials of drilling thirty twelve-year-olds into a force fit to guard their queen.

The party continued on its course. The new LP player was plugged in, and dance music furthered the process of softening up which the wine and brandy had begun. As Jeremy went out to kick around the new football from the Cavendishes (what finally put paid to his political career in 1991 was the revelation by a prostitute that he preferred to make love in Peterborough United's football colours—if it had been a smart London club he might have survived, but humble Peterborough had the nation chuckling), the three couples inside began dancing to Henry Hall and Glen Miller, first together, then, after more drink, with different partners, their cheeks getting redder, their eyes glazed, their innuendos more bed-orientated.

The major and his wife dropped out. Their special reasons were acknowledged, and it left the more unbuttoned foursome more freedom. First Veronica and Gavin went upstairs, and Veronica dropped her revealing dress to the floor outside the marital bedroom as a sign that it was occupied. Soon Henry and Cecily followed, noted the dress, then made their way to the principal guest bedroom, where the bed had been made in anticipation of just such an eventuality.

Daylight faded. Jeremy came in from kicking the ball around and took to his room the clockwork car that sped round and round in dizzy circles. By now the bedrooms were quiet. The major and

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his lady had been commenting on other people's conduct, manners, and morals in the privacy of the estate office, and they now collected their bottle, still nearly full, and went down to the servants' quarters, rather as the major had been used to visit the Other Ranks' mess, and thanked Susan and Gareth for a wonderful meal. The pair were drinking a bottle of household brandy, superceded by the unlooked-for crate, which Henry had generously taken downstairs for their use. Gareth stood up for the major but Susan forgot to, and they soon heard the Farnabys' Austin Seven chugging down the drive.

"Bloody Threakleston-Bings!" said Susan. "I bet they're at it with each other's partners."

"We could be—" began Gareth.

"Not yet!" said Susan, as she generally did. As she spoke, Henry drifted blearily in, carrying his wife's dress, which he deposited in the laundry basket, and drifted out again.

As darkness fell, Jeremy felt the need to go to the lavatory, and once again passed along the landing. Snores were coming from Mummy and Daddy's bedroom, but when he looked down he saw his father and mother in the mock-baronial Great Hall—his father having a white fuzz stuck on both cheeks below the ears, his mother in the low-backed dress she had worn at dinner. As Jeremy began back to his room he realized his father had pushed his mother back onto the table by the far wall of the Hall, under the hunting trophies of his great-grandfather, and he heard the word, distinctly hissed, "cow." He had long since given up looking for a four-legged, contented-looking animal chewing grass when he heard that word, and he wasn't sure of the meaning of the other word he heard, so he went back into the nursery, wound up his lovely new car, and contentedly played with it until he heard a car draw up outside. He jumped on his bed to look out of the window above it, and thus was the first to witness the arrival of Inspector Pittock and Sergeant Fry.

It was Gareth who had called the police, and Gareth who took the pair into the estate office after they had briefly viewed the body in the sitting room with the stab wounds to the heart. They called at once to Peterborough HQ for scientific backup.

"Where are the people of the house?" asked Pittock, looking around.

"You've just seen one of them."

"Well, where's Mrs. Threakleston-Bing? I presume she's been told."

"No, she hasn't. So far as I know, she's upstairs. It's awkward . . . a delicate matter."

"Hmm. There were two cars outside the front door."

"That's right. There've been guests for Christmas dinner. Major

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and Mrs. Farnaby have gone home. He's a headmaster. She's in the family way."

"I know them. Fry—get on to the school. I want them back here. . . . What about the others?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Cavendish."

"Mr. *Gavin* Cavendish?" When he nodded, Pittock whistled. "They have the reputation of fast livers."

"You could say that. . . . I think that he and Mrs. Threakleston-Bing . . ."

"I *see.*" Pittock meditated slowly, distaste suffusing his face. When Fry came back into the room with the news that the major and Mrs. Farnaby were on their way back to the manor, Pittock made up his mind. "Go up to the bedrooms—which one?—"

"Second to the right at the top of the stairs," said Gareth.

"—and catch them *in flagrante.* That will stop them trying any silly business and wasting our time. Tell them to stay where they are. If you can find Mrs. Cavendish, tell her the same."

As he stood there, pursing his lips, Inspector Pittock foresaw the results of this particular investigation: faithless wife, angry husband, and the husband it was who got it in the neck. Or in this case, the heart. What a way to celebrate the Lord's birthday!

But two hours later he was not so sure. He talked to the major and his wife first. Good, upstanding, truthful people, in Pittock's view. He'd heard of the school, and knew the major ran a tight ship, if that wasn't a mixed metaphor. When he heard about the bottles of brandy, the dancing, the swapping of partners, the disappearances to the bedrooms, Pittock was shocked to the core. Ten years later, in the swinging 'sixties, Pittock was frequently heard to say, "That's when I realized what was on the way. That's when I saw just how far standards were sliding. The descendents of Cephas Threakleston, swapping wives like bloody foreigners, like Frenchmen! I tell you, I was shocked to the core!"

It should be said that Pittock knew no more about the habits of Frenchmen and their wives than he knew about the habits of the Trobriand Islanders.

When he talked to the unfaithful widow, she had obviously had time to get her story and Gavin Cavendish's to coincide. They had had too much to drink, they had gone off to bed together—"these things happen," she said airily to Pittock, to whom they did not happen—and they had been together the *whole* time. No, she had not slept, Gavin had not slept (What, Pittock wondered, had they been discussing? The symbolism of the Wise Men's gifts?), and they neither of them had left the bedroom. Cecily Cavendish's plight was still deeper. She and Henry had—you know—and then he had dressed and gone off—gone downstairs, in fact, and then she had slept off the brandy—you know how it is—and remembered noth-

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ing until Sergeant Fry had knocked and come in—I mean, the shock, hearing that someone you've just been . . . you know.

After this testimony to the approach of a new Sodom and Gomorrah Pittock felt, as he said, the need for a bit of fresh air. He was, however, only speaking metaphorically, because when he left the estate office he prowled around the ground floor of Dorleston Manor, his piggy eyes going everywhere, noting the crate of brandy, the two half-drunk bottles, the hunting trophies of the ancestral Threakleston, with the empty slit where a hunting-knife had once been, the tidy dining-room table, with everything cleared away and a floral decoration in place in the centre. Then he saw in one corner of the room a Dinky Toy, a paper hooter, a spelling book, and a knitted kangaroo.

"What's this?" he demanded of Sergeant Fry. "Is there a child?"

"Jeremy," came the answer from Gareth, lurking around the door. "Just five. He'll be in his room."

"Why wasn't I told there was a child?"

Gareth didn't say, "You didn't ask," but wisely held his peace.

"And while he was in his nursery the parents were . . . Oh, it makes my blood boil!"

"Shall I fetch him?"

"No. Show me to the nursery."

The nursery announced itself by the noise of clockwork. When they opened the door, a red car was spinning in circles of eight around the floor.

"I don't have to ask what you got for Christmas," said Sergeant Fry.

"Everyone else did," said Jeremy. Fry got down to the floor and wound up the car, sending it noisily on its way again.

"We're going to ask you some questions, Jeremy," he said.

"Why?"

"Your daddy has had a bit of an accident, and we want to know how it happened."

"What sort of an accident?"

"Your mummy will tell you later. When did you last see your daddy?"

The boy thought.

"I went to have a wee-wee. I saw him and Mummy then."

"When was this?"

"Oh, when I'd played with the car, and had a little sleep."

"So you got up, and went out to the landing?"

"Yes. There was snoring coming from Mummy and Daddy's room." The two policemen looked significantly at each other. "I thought they were asleep, but when I looked down they were in the hall. Sort of kissing."

"Sort of kissing?"

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"Their faces were close. . . ." The child seized on a new thought. "I've discovered something about Daddy."

The inspector and the sergeant both stiffened. "Oh?"

"It was Daddy who was Santa Claus. I expect Santa couldn't come after all, so Daddy dressed up as him so I wouldn't be disappointed. He still had bits of white beard on his face." Again the policemen looked at each other.

"So they were kissing, or close to each other."

"That's right. Mummy had her back to me, and it was dirty, and their faces were close. But when I came back from my wee-wee Daddy was bending her over the table in the hall, and saying words like 'cow' and that other word . . . 'sluck' or something like that. It was one of their rows."

"So what happened?"

"I don't know. I just came back here and went on playing with my car."

"Jeremy," said Pittock, "what do you mean by saying your mother's back was dirty?"

"It had a great big black spot on it. Like soot."

Back downstairs in the Great Hall, Pittock went over and inspected the table, then looked up to the landing to ascertain that the boy could have seen what he said he saw. Then he fingered the slit in the assemblage of hunting trophies and methods of slaughter that stood behind the table. The knife taken from the slit, judging by his expression, could indeed have inflicted the wound in Henry's chest. But he was not happy. There was dirty and difficult work to be done. Luckily it could be left to Sergeant Fry.

"You're going to have to inspect their backs. For a black mark."

"Someone's got to do it," Fry sighed. "But she could have washed it off."

"If she knew it was there. And if it wasn't a birthmark. Do all the ladies, and don't take any nonsense from them."

"Starting with the wife?"

"I suppose so. But if it was a birthmark—"

They were interrupted by a scuffling sound from a door leading into the hall. Pittock, who had once been a nifty half-back for an amateur side, was through the door in a flash, through the hall, then down a long corridor, just in time to see a foot disappearing through a green baize door at the far end. Seconds later, he and Fry were in the massive kitchen, and Fry had his hands on Gareth's collar and was forcing him down into a chair.

"So you were listening," said Pittock.

"Don't get much excitement in this household," said Gareth sullenly.

"I'd've thought you got all too much. But you're not just interested, you're involved, aren't you?" and to the man's vigorously

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shaking head he said: "What do you know about a woman with a dirty back? Or a woman with a mark on her back? A birthmark?" Gareth shook his head again, but his heart wasn't in it.

"You the only servant here?" asked Fry, looking at the table where two dessert plates with the remains of Christmas pudding were set. "There's a lady's maid, isn't there?" Gareth nodded miserably. "Tell us about the birthmark on her back." There was a silence, then Gareth came clean.

"Susan. Susan Sullivan. . . . It's not as though I've seen it often. Snooty, she is. It's very much a favour if she gives anything at all. Except to *him,* of course."

"Him?" asked Pittock. "Mr. Threakleston-Bing, I suppose?"

"She had her plans, had Susan. I've always thought that. She wasn't an ordinary servant—cut above us, and she knew it. So why was she here? Once she'd got him in her toils she was going to work the situation for all it was worth."

"Blackmail," said Pittock.

"That most likely. He had his eye on a political career. The descendent of Cephas Threakleston being member for the Peterborough constituency where his brick-factory had been. She'd like to have been mistress of this place, but failing that she was going to milk him. Nice little earner. Then she'd move on."

"That is, failing divorce, then a remarriage to her?"

"That's what I thought."

"You weren't in on the plan?"

"NO! . . . Don't make me laugh. She was like a sphinx. I'd never have got anything out of her if I'd tried to discuss it."

"When did you last see her?"

"Oh, over an hour ago. . . . Mrs. Bing's car's gone from the garage."

Pittock nearly swore (his *bl*'s were always a sign that a case was getting beyond him), got the registration number, then sent Fry off to the phone again. Fuming, he turned back to Gareth.

"So let's make a guess. Susan dressed up in Mrs. Bing's outfit. How did she get hold of it?"

"He came down and dropped it in the laundry basket. I expect she'd just taken it off somewhere. He was making a point."

"Bl— So she put it on, and went to find him to suggest that she made quite as good a Mrs. Threakleston-Bing as the existing one."

"Maybe."

"And he, drunk, fed up with her, didn't react as hoped, called her a cow and a slut—"

"If you say so."

"We have evidence. And she, in a fit of temper—"

"She had one. I told her it'd be her downfall."

"—snatched at the hunting knife and plunged it into him."

"And dragged him to the sitting room to delay his being found."

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"And then collected together whatever spoil she'd already got her hands on, got the key to Mrs. Bing's car—"

"We often use it for shopping in Peterborough."

"—and off she went. And all we have to do is pick up her and the car."

But doing that proved more difficult than they expected. They first thought she would have gone to Peterborough, which even on Christmas Day had a first-rate train service. They thought she would choose London, or perhaps Cambridge, to disappear in. The newspapers carried descriptions only, there being no photograph available. They described her suitcase, and they described the strawberry-shaped birthmark just below her left shoulder blade (they praised to the skies the observational powers of the dead man's little boy, though in fact the description owed more to Gareth). On New Year's Eve the car was found abandoned in the Birmingham area. The most reliable of various sightings had her on the boat from Fishguard to Dublin. It made sense to disappear in a crowd of Irish people returning home for the festive season, particularly as the Irish Republic had no extradition treaty with Britain.

Time passed. The grieving widow made a great show of maternal interest in Jeremy, but soon cooled off. He went through the usual cycle of parental neglect in the English upper-classes: prep school, boarding at seven; public school (i.e. private) at thirteen; then Oxford, the City, the House of Commons. By then the case had long been forgotten. The police, of course, said they never closed the files on a murder enquiry, but they buried it pretty deep in their basement.

The next time the name of Threakleston-Bing got into the papers there was no reason for the police to be involved. The bizarre sexual habits of MPs were of no concern to anyone but themselves. And the women who serviced them. And the popular press. The woman who serviced Jeremy, then junior minister at the Department of Rural Affairs, was a lady from Tibilisi, an early refugee from the Eastern bloc as the Cold War was ending, and one with a concern for customer satisfaction unusual in one nurtured by the Soviet system. No, the goings-on in a Soho brothel were of no interest to the nation's police force.

However, if they had got involved, someone with a long memory might have noticed that the brothel employing Varvara from Tibilisi was run by an older woman who called herself Madame Susie. And if they had dug deeper still, they might have found that she had below her left shoulder blade a black, strawberry-shaped birthmark. And that this was a fact known to many people. Many men. Many, many men. ●

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SECRET SANTA

by Steve Hockensmith

MONDAY, DECEMBER 15

In his own way, Erik Bigelow was a stickler for punctuality. According to the employee manual, everyone who worked for Now! Publishing was supposed to arrive no later than eight-thirty A.M. So when Bigelow came in at his usual time—nine-twenty—he had his eyes peeled for anyone as lax and late as he was. Those he caught he lectured on the importance of team spirit and playing by the rules and giving one's all. He gave the same speech to any Now! employees he saw trying to sneak out earlier than his usual departure time, which was four-fifty.

Bigelow would have no time for lectures this particular morning, as he was exceptionally late, even by the standards he set for himself. A new batch of screener DVDs had arrived at the office on Friday, and Bigelow had snagged them all before they could make their way to their intended destination—the cubicle belonging to Chris McCoy, editor of *DVD Now!* magazine. Bigelow wasn't exactly McCoy's boss. He was director of circulation and produc-

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tion, and technically none of the staff editors worked for him. But Bigelow made a lot more money than McCoy, and that counted for something. And since management gets to allocate resources and such, Bigelow had allocated the DVDs straight into his vast private collection. As a result, he'd stayed up extra late Sunday night, unable to turn off the commentary track to the *Star Trek V Director's Edition* until he'd heard every last thing William Shatner had to say.

So he woke up late and tired, much to the consternation of his Rottweiler, Bantha. He couldn't leave for work without taking Bantha around the block, letting the dog leave behind evidence of her presence so large and hard to ignore it could easily convince experienced animal trackers that a herd of buffalo had recently moved through the area. And he couldn't pass the neighborhood Starbucks without stopping in for a Vente Mocha latte. And he couldn't have a Vente Mocha latte without having two Krispy Kreme donuts to go with it. And he couldn't very well have two *old* Krispy Kreme donuts, which might have been sitting in the display case for as long as twenty minutes. So he had to kill time letting Bantha terrorize squirrels in the park across the street until the sign lit up announcing that the *fresh* Krispy Kreme donuts were ready.

All of which meant he walked into the office nearly an hour and a half later than the Now! Publishing employee manual mandated. No one said anything to him about playing by the rules or giving one's all, however. The only person higher than Bigelow in the Now! food chain was the publisher, Dave Crowley, and he almost never showed up before noon. And Bigelow's only equal/potential rival—the company's editorial director, Alex Sandberg—was too busy actually working to notice Bigelow's comings and goings, not to mention too wimpy to say anything even if he did. (Sandberg was the company's resident Mr. Nice Guy, which was one more reason Bigelow hated him.)

But Bigelow didn't make it to his desk without any critical comments whatsoever. The ones he heard just had nothing to do with his tardiness.

Last year it was fruitcakes; this year it's the "Secret Santas" of office Christmas parties that provide grist for Steve Hockensmith's mill. The short story- and novel-writing humorist is a resident of Petaluma, California, far from the offices of *EQMM*. So on-target is his satire, however, that we can't helping feeling it's not just any office of which he writes, but our very own. We think you'll probably feel the same!

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"You forgot, didn't you?" Marcy Albright said as Bigelow hustled by her cubicle.

Bigelow skidded to a stop.

"Forgot what?" he asked, which, of course, answered his secretary's question.

(Officially, she wasn't really his secretary. He just liked to think of her that way. She was actually an executive assistant/office manager. The fact that he had to share her with Crowley was fine, a necessary bit of economizing. That he had to share her with Sandberg was a galling injustice he would rectify one day.)

"The 'Secret Santa' thing. It starts today," Marcy said. "Don't tell me you're giving somebody a cup of coffee."

The only thing Bigelow held in his hands was his Starbucks cup. All that remained of the donuts was a sugary film that coated his fingers and lips.

"Oh, that," Bigelow said. "Hold on."

He set his coffee down on Marcy's desk, pulled out his wallet, and removed a wrinkled five-dollar bill.

"Run across the street and buy me . . . oh, I don't know. A sandwich or something."

"You're gonna give somebody a *sandwich* for Christmas?"

"The sandwich is for me. I didn't have time to grab anything for lunch this morning. I'll take care of the present later."

"What kind of sandwich do you want?"

"Oh, whatever. You know me."

Bigelow leaned over to get his coffee, taking the opportunity as he did so to try for a peek down Marcy's blouse.

"I'm easy to please," he said.

Marcy stood and wrapped a coat around herself, and Bigelow headed into his office whistling "Sleigh Ride." His in-box was piled high and the message light on his phone was blinking, but first things first. There were goodies to unwrap.

Power was always sweet, but in December it had the especially satisfying flavor of chocolate. Now! published three magazines, which meant come the holidays three different sets of vendors and publicists and freelancers tried to curry favor by showering the office with edible delights. Bigelow saw to it that the cornucopia spilled out in his direction, giving Marcy standing orders that all large packages should be delivered to his office first. The truly choice gifts went home with him. The second tier he passed along to Crowley as part of his ongoing efforts to keep his lips locked to the publisher's posterior. The dregs—tins of stale popcorn, tacky ornaments that had shattered in transit, etc.—often ended up in the staff lunchroom with a Post-It note attached: *Merry Christmas, gang! Help yourselves!—Erik Bigelow.*

Today's haul seemed to be shaping up nicely. Several large boxes

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had already arrived via Fed Ex and UPS, and the regular mail would undoubtedly bring more. Bigelow was about to tear into the most promising package—a small but satisfyingly heavy box with the unmistakable rattle of gourmet nuts—when a brightly wrapped package caught his eye. There was a tag attached.

"For Erik," it read. "From your Secret Santa."

Bigelow rolled his eyes. The idea of giving anonymous gifts to a randomly chosen coworker was bad enough. Why should he waste his time and money on somebody he didn't even need to kiss up to? But to make the whole thing even more aggravating, when Marcy had come by with the little red Santa hat full of names, he'd drawn out the one he wanted to see least of all: Alex Sandberg. So now he had to find cutesy presents for the man he considered the only real threat he faced at Now!.

He leaned over and looked in his trash can. The picture he'd dumped there Friday hadn't been cleared out yet. It was a small, tacky, plastic-framed painting of cats caroling outside a snow-covered home while a Scrooge-ish basset hound glowered at them from an upstairs window. It had been a gift from the printer who handled *Antiques Now!*, Bigelow's least favorite publication in the Now! stable because it consistently drew such feeble freebies. Bigelow had been so disgusted with the lame painting he hadn't even bothered walking it to the staff lunchroom.

But now it had its uses. Bigelow pulled the picture from the garbage can just as Marcy stepped into his office holding a brown paper bag.

"Clean this up and throw it on Sandberg's desk when he's not looking," Bigelow said.

"Hey! You're not supposed to let anybody know who your—"

Bigelow was already rooting around in the paper bag, which he'd snatched from Marcy when she'd reached out to take the cat painting.

"What's this? Pastrami?" he asked.

"Corned beef."

He handed the bag back to her. "You know what would really be good? Roast beef. With horseradish. Ooooh, and a pickle."

Marcy opened her mouth to say something, but Bigelow managed to close it with the droopy-eyed, tight-lipped, It-won't-make-any-difference-what-you-say-so-why-bother? boss look he'd mastered since his latest promotion. She turned and left without saying a thing, and Bigelow got back to the business at hand: opening presents.

He saved the package from his Secret Santa for last. It was flat and rectangular and stiff—obviously a book. Not being edible or formatted for a DVD player, therefore, it held little interest for him. The paper it was wrapped in was red with the word "HO!" in

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chunky white letters repeated over and over again. When he had the gift-wrap ripped away from the book's cover, he sat for a long moment blinking down at his gift, confused.

The book was *Stop Me Before I Steal Again! Controlling Your Kleptomania* by Dr. Avi Birnbaum.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16

Bigelow had almost forgotten about his Secret Santa when he came to work the next morning. He'd spent a few minutes wondering about the "gift"—what did it mean and who could have sent it and was it someone he could fire? But he'd had a good day after that. Crowley hadn't bothered showing up at all, which meant Bigelow didn't even have to pretend to work. Instead he'd surfed the 'Net, done some Christmas shopping, caught a matinée showing of *The Matrix: Revolutions,* hovered around the cubicles cute girls worked in, and then called it a day early, leaving the office with two shopping bags stuffed with plundered goodies.

Once again, Bigelow's desk was piled high with boxes when he arrived. And once again, one of them was red with "HO! HO! HO!" in white letters and a little card from his Secret Santa. This time, Bigelow opened that package first. It was another book.

Dirty Work: How White-Collar Criminals Are Destroying Corporate America.

Bigelow's balding head went instantly slick with sweat.

Was this some kind of accusation? Maybe even a blackmail attempt? All over a few measly DVDs?

Well, a few hundred DVDs, when you added up all the screeners he had piled in his bedroom closet at home. And then there were all the Christmas presents he'd appropriated.

Oh, and those little liberties he sometimes took with his expense reports. And he'd stolen someone's leftover pizza out of the fridge one day. It was covered with pepperoni and mushrooms and he just couldn't resist. . . .

No, he was being silly. Bigelow shook these harrowing thoughts out of his head as effectively as he shook off his conscience. Someone was turning this "Secret Santa" thing into a sick joke, that was all. And it was time he found out who. He walked out to Marcy's cube.

"Did you see someone sneak into my office this morning?" Bigelow asked.

Marcy smiled and shrugged. "Maybe," she said.

"Who was it?"

Marcy shook her head. "Hey, I'm not gonna tell. Secret Santas are supposed to stay secret. What'd he give you, anyway?"

"Well," Bigelow said, about to vent his frustration.

He stopped himself just in time. The situation was humiliating

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enough without having the whole office knowing about it.

"Just some knickknacks," he said.

"So did you have time yesterday to perform *your* Secret Santa duties?" Marcy asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

It took Bigelow a few seconds to get what she meant.

"Oh, sure," he said. He went back to his office and came back a minute later holding a chipped mug with the words "Merlin Distribution Services—Working Newsstand Magic Since 1972" printed on the side. It came from a gift set of gourmet coffee beans and chocolate-coated stir-spoons. Bigelow liked gourmet coffee beans and chocolate-coated stir spoons. Chipped mugs he could do without. "Throw that in Sandberg's office when you get a chance."

Bigelow took a slow tour around the office after that, making note of who was in, who was out, and who shot him nervous or resentful glances, which was just about everyone. The *Muscles Now!* staff had wrapped up a tight deadline the previous Friday, so they'd already begun their Christmas vacations. But *Antiques Now!* and *DVD Now!* had issues to get to the printer by the end of the week, so both magazines' editors and designers were showing up early, leaving late, and doing lots of frantic keyboard pounding in between.

Bigelow ambled from cubicle to cubicle, dribbling "constructive criticism" behind him like stale breadcrumbs.

"Is that the best picture you've got?"

"Why is that blue?"

"That font's too disco. Try something more techno."

"You're putting *what* on the cover?"

"Crowley's gonna hate that."

"That sucks."

Anytime he saw what looked like a Secret Santa gift on someone's desk, he'd snatch it up and say, "Heeeey! Cool! Where'd this come from?" But these questions didn't get him far. Like his advice, his conversational gambits were usually ignored.

Even Sandberg brushed him off. Usually he was all smiles for everyone, even Bigelow. But now he was hunched over his desk sifting through piles of proofs, "just pitching in" to "help out the troops," he said. The Pollyanna show-off. Bigelow smiled and wished him good luck and silently prayed for God to smite him with a bolt of lightning.

So the only staff member to give Bigelow more than a one-word response was Joyce Starr, the editor of *Antiques Now!*. And even then she wasn't saying anything he wanted to hear, which was usual for her.

"Hey, Erik!" she called out when she noticed him being an especially persistent pest around her associate editor, who just happened to be twenty-three, female, and cute as a button. "Next year

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instead of scheduling two deadlines the week before Christmas, why not go for all three? Or better yet, how about if we all have to go to the printer on *Christmas Eve?* Wouldn't that look neater on your little calendar?"

Starr immediately became his number-one suspect. But then Bigelow remembered Marcy's comment that morning about the Secret Santa.

"What'd he give you, anyway?"

He.

Bigelow was crestfallen. Starr was the only staff member who consistently criticized him to his face. It would be just like her to slip those nasty little digs onto his desk, as well. Finding a way to get her fired—for he couldn't admit the real reason lest it raise uncomfortable questions—would've been a pleasurable challenge.

And now the challenge he faced was no pleasure at all. Drop out the women, drop out the staff of *Muscles Now!*, and he was still left with . . .

Bigelow couldn't quite get the figure worked out in his head, so he retreated to his office and hunkered down over the staff telephone list.

Seven men. Seven potential enemies.

He would narrow them down to one, and then he would strike.

Starting tomorrow. He was feeling a bit depressed, so he went to a matinée to cheer himself up.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17

Bigelow meant to get to work early. He had his alarm set for the ungodly hour of seven A.M., and he'd turned off his *Two Towers: Special Edition* DVD at eleven on the dot. He should've arisen at seven rested and ready for action—the "action" being getting to the office before his Secret Santa.

But he'd been fidgety the night before, and he'd tried to calm himself with a box of chocolate-covered pretzels sent to *DVD Now!* by the flacks at Warner Home Video. The pretzels knotted his stomach and twisted his dreams, and all night long he heard the same faint echo.

Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!

When the alarm went off, he smacked the snooze button. Ten minutes later, he smacked it again. Ten minutes later, again.

He ended up "snoozing" a dozen times. By the time he finally got up, not only was he late, but Bantha, annoyed by all the false alarms, had left a large, unwrapped gift under the Christmas tree.

When Bigelow finally got to work, that knot in his stomach pulled even tighter.

"You must've been a good boy this year," Marcy said as he rushed by her cube.

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Bigelow whipped around to face her. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

Marcy blinked at him for a second, obviously taken aback by the unexpected heat in his voice. "I mean Santa's been in to see you," she said. "That's all. Just a joke."

"Oh."

"You might want to lay off the Starbucks a little, Erik," Marcy said as he stomped off to his office.

He slammed the door. Now even Marcy was giving him a hard time. Sweet, loyal Marcy. Sweet, loyal, *shapely* Marcy. What was she wearing today, anyway? He was so worked up he hadn't even noticed. This insanity had to end!

The package was waiting for him on his desk. It had the same note, the same mocking gift-wrap. But it wasn't a book this time. It was square, and it rattled when he shook it. He attacked the box like Bantha attacking a slipper, sending scraps of wrapping paper flying up over his head.

Inside the package he found a small bottle of mouthwash, a tin of Altoids, a tube of "extra-strength super-mint" toothpaste, and a brochure entitled "Overcoming Halitosis: Five Steps to a Fresher You."

Bigelow brought his hand up to his mouth, puffed into it, then sucked in deeply through his nose. Yes, okay, maybe there was a little staleness there. But he'd had another Vente latte on his way to work that morning. Surely his breath would freshen itself up over time. He didn't have halitosis—did he?

No! He wasn't going to let some anonymous peon psych him out. He was going to march out of his office and lay a serious smack-down on . . . whoever.

He started for the door, hoping a brilliant plan of some sort would form in his mind before he reached the other side. Instead, the door opened and Marcy leaned in.

"Crowley's here," she said.

Bigelow froze.

"So early?"

"Well, it *is* after eleven."

Bigelow swiveled around and hurried back to his desk. He snatched up the phone and started making calls he'd been putting off for days. When Crowley dropped by a few minutes later, Bigelow was on the line with a printer's rep.

Bigelow held up a "just a sec" finger as Crowley took a seat.

"Don't give me that!" Bigelow barked, even though he and the rep had been having a perfectly pleasant conversation about the weather just a moment before. "That last cover looked like mud!"

"What?" the rep asked, perplexed by the sudden abuse.

"All right, then! That's better!" Bigelow slammed the phone

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down and shook his head. "Those Lantern Graphics guys—you have to ride their asses every step of the way. So what can I do for you, boss?"

Crowley kicked his tiny feet up on the edge of Bigelow's desk and shrugged his muscle-bound shoulders. "What's goin' on?"

Bigelow passed a hand over the clutter on his desk like one of those models on *The Price Is Right* who spend all their time gesturing seductively over cars and boxes of Turtle Wax.

"Same ol', same ol'," he said. "How 'bout with you?"

"I caught the new *Matrix* flick Saturday."

"Oh yeah? What did you think?"

And they were off.

This was how Bigelow really earned his salary—yakking with Crowley. Sometimes he thought it was much, much harder than a real job.

He'd known Crowley since high school, when his now pumped-up boss had been a one-hundred-and-one-pound pipsqueak with braces and thick glasses and bad hair. The hair had never improved, but the braces and the glasses eventually went away, as did Crowley's pipsqueak status. During his college years, Crowley had discovered competition bodybuilding, and he eventually dropped out to devote himself to the "sport" full-time. He didn't get far, his crowning glory being fourth place in the Tri-State Mr. Olympus Muscle Show, but he didn't retire from competition with nothing to show for it. For one thing, he now had a body that would do Arnold Schwarzenegger proud, even if his face would still send Howdy Doody running for plastic surgery. More importantly, he'd laid the foundation for his future empire, publishing a monthly newsletter called *Muscle Men*. The newsletter's circulation grew and grew, making a particularly large jump after a marketing consultant convinced Crowley to change the name to something that didn't sound like a guide to local leather bars. So *Muscle Men* became *Muscles Now!*. It also became a magazine. And it made Crowley rich enough to start magazines devoted to the two other great loves of his life: movies and collecting antique Mason jars. (*Jars Now!* became *Antiques Now!* after one disastrous issue.) When Crowley's company grew large enough to require an office manager, he'd hired his old high-school buddy Bigelow, who'd been handing out pictures from behind the desk at a Wal-Mart Photo Developing Center. Through a tenacious campaign of butt-kissing and backstabbing, Bigelow had risen to circulation assistant, then circulation manager, then director of circulation, and, finally, after one more carefully orchestrated character assassination, director of circulation and production. Of course, he wasn't through rising yet, as there was one more director-level position that naturally belonged on his resume. But

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for every chance he got to slag off Sandberg, he had to endure twenty minutes of talk about weightlifting and a brutal *thirty* minutes about Mason jars. The only relief came when he and Crowley talked about movies, but even then he was hemmed in and frustrated. Once upon a time he could—and would—tell Crowley he was an idiot to think that *Return of the Jedi* was the best *Star Wars* movie and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* was better than *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. But that had been in high school. These days, Crowley could say *Dude, Where's My Car?* was better than *Citizen Kane* and Bigelow would have to nod thoughtfully and say, "Yeah, maybe you're right."

And even that simple, if irritating, act of yes-man bootlicking seemed to be beyond Bigelow just now. As Crowley droned on and on about how many "reps" he'd managed in the gym that morning, Bigelow's mind wandered the hallways of the Now! office, stopping at the desks of his seven suspects. Five of them would be easy to deal with. They were designers and editors, mere bugs to be squashed beneath his managerial boot heel. But what if his Secret Santa was Peter Jarry, the comptroller? Maybe Jarry had noticed the charges for Pay-Per-View movies and room-service filet mignon that always piled up on Bigelow's bill when he went on company trips. Maybe he even knew those company trips were completely bogus, as Bigelow only insisted on doing personal press checks for *Antiques Now!*, which was printed at a plant just thirty miles from Disney World.

Or perhaps it was Sandberg. He couldn't be as innocent as he appeared. His image was squeaky-clean—never gossiped, worked hard, took care of his staff, blah blah blah, exactly the kind of goody-two-shoes b.s. that reminded Bigelow what a fraud he really was.

It had to be an act. Or maybe Sandberg had simply seen the writing on the wall, toughened up, and launched a preemptive strike. He could be trying to throw Bigelow off, psych him out.

Well, if that was his plan, he—

"Bro, are you even listening to me?"

Bigelow blinked away the pleasing vision of Sandberg roasting over a barbecue pit.

"Of course," he said. "And I couldn't agree more."

What he'd agreed with, he soon found out, was that Atlas Strong Shoulder Jars could indeed replace Ball Perfect Mason Jars as the most popular fruit-jar collectibles in their class. Seemingly satisfied that Bigelow would back him up on this controversial assertion, Crowley plowed on. But Bigelow had the uncomfortable feeling that the publisher was watching him closely now, looking for signs that he wasn't paying attention. Bigelow overcompensated by laughing a little too uproariously at Crowley's strained

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pun on the phrase "Ball Perfect" and becoming a little too incensed when his boss described attempts to pass off irradiated selenium *jars* as amber.

Mercifully, Crowley eventually drifted off jars and onto business. That gave Bigelow the opportunity to insert not one, not two, but three separate digs at Sandberg into the conversation before Crowley finally arose—nearly two hours after he sat down—and went off to his own office to look over dummy covers and sign checks.

Bigelow felt drained by the meeting, but he had no choice. With Crowley hanging around the rest of the day, he actually had to stay in his office and at least keep up the appearance of diligence. He made half-hearted progress on his in-box—which was more progress than he usually made—all the while trying to figure out how to strip Santa of his secret.

In the end, he could only come up with one solution. He'd always hated logic puzzles and guessing games. No one was going to tell him, and he didn't want to ask. He didn't have a Spycam or a fingerprinting kit. He didn't know how to rig a grenade with a tripwire and he wasn't sure where to get a grenade or a tripwire even if he did.

He would have to rely on simple snooping. And with nearly everyone working extra late to hit their deadlines, that wouldn't be an option today.

So Bigelow somehow stuck it out till five o'clock, and then he went home. He took Bantha for her pre-bedtime walk at eight-thirty, when he was usually popping in his second DVD of the evening. He was under the covers by nine.

But though he fell asleep quickly, that horrible *Ho! Ho! Ho!* haunted his dreams, as did a giant bottle of Scope that lumbered after him like Frankenstein's monster, chasing him through one Starbucks after another.

When the alarm went off at five A.M., he felt as if he hadn't slept at all.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18

It was a new experience for Bigelow—being the first one at work. He didn't like it. The office was quiet and dark, not the bright, bustling place where people other than himself were always hustling to and fro accomplishing things. The stillness was something he couldn't quite accept, and he moved through the hallways half-expecting someone to pop out of the shadows and shout, "Bigelow! What the hell are you doing here?"

But he managed a smile when he stepped into his office. There was no gift on his desk. He was the one Ho! Ho! Ho!-ing now. Whoever his Secret Santa was, *he'd beat him in that morning.* And

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now Santa was about to see who had the real claws.

Jarry's office was the closest, so Bigelow started there. It took him ten minutes to go through every desk drawer and filing cabinet. He found nothing more incriminating than a shot glass and a bottle of Jim Beam. They wouldn't help him solve his mystery, but they were illuminating discoveries nonetheless. Bigelow began to wonder why he'd never done this before.

Chris McCoy, the editor of *DVD Now!*, was next. His cubicle posed more of a challenge, as it was overflowing with proofs and plastic sleeves stuffed with slides. Bigelow was careful not to get anything out of order, for though McCoy's work area looked like utter chaos, his magazine never missed a deadline, and Bigelow had to assume there was some kind of system involved, even if it escaped his powers of detection.

He found a stash of snacks in one drawer, and he reached in and pulled out a variety pack of Quaker Oats granola bars. He'd been so anxious to get to the office he hadn't stopped off for coffee and donuts that morning, and all this sneaking around was making him hungry. He sorted through the granola bars until he found what he was looking for—a S'mores bar. He took one and then, after a moment's reflection, a Chocolate Chip and a Cookies 'n' Cream for later. Then he started to put the box back.

He stopped, suddenly gripping the box so hard one corner caved in. In the drawer was a small, folded slip of white paper that had been buried underneath the granola bars. It looked just like the one he'd pulled out of Marcy's Santa hat the week before. Bigelow picked it up and unfolded it. Written on it were two words.

"JOYCE STARR."

Bigelow grinned. He was down to six suspects now. And he knew exactly which one he wanted to focus on next. He put the slip of paper and the granola bars back in place, then he headed to the office of Alex Sandberg.

Which was locked. It was such a shock to Bigelow he stood there jiggling the door handle for half a minute before he finally accepted the infuriating fact of it. He stood there awhile longer, staring through the glass at Sandberg's desk like a Victorian waif pressing his soot-covered nose up against a pastry-shop window.

What kind of paranoid jerk locks his office door? What did Sandberg have to be worried about? What did he have to hide?

Bigelow gave the door a kick before moving on to the cubicle of *DVD Now!*'s art director, Carl or Kurt Somebody. Bigelow barely knew the guy, usually thinking of him only as "the designer with the pierced nose"—when he thought of him at all. He couldn't imagine Carl or Kurt hating him as much as his Secret Santa obviously did, and he stopped his snooping mid drawer to return to Sandberg's office and spend a few more futile moments strug-

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gling with the door handle. When he went back to Carl/Kurt's desk, he resumed his searching without enthusiasm, certain now that the answers he sought were on the other side of that locked door.

Pierced-nose-guy's cube yielded nothing of use, though Bigelow had been reminded of his name, having seen it on a credit-card bill he'd come across: Todd Hubble. He also discovered that Todd owed MasterCard $539.32, and that $122 of that was going to "The Hottie Hook-Up Hotline." That discovery should've brought Bigelow some kind of twisted chuckle, but it didn't. He couldn't stop obsessing about what might be hidden in Sandberg's desk, and everything else now seemed like a waste of time.

He was able to eliminate another suspect when he moved on to the next cubicle, this one belonging to *DVD Now!*'s associate editor, whom Bigelow knew as Tim the Kid with Freckles. Tucked away behind a stack of reference books was a bar of pink soap-on-a-rope shaped like a Teletubby. A red ribbon had been taped to the package.

It was a lame gift, but not an evil one. And there was no HO! HO! HO! wrapping paper in sight. Freckled Tim was off the hook. There were still two more cubes to go. Bigelow began putting the soap and books back in place.

"Yo, Timmy!" a voice called out. "You made it in pretty . . . Oh."

Bigelow spun around to find Chris McCoy standing behind him, a look of embarrassed shock on his face.

"I came in early and I wanted to take a look at the proof of your masthead but I couldn't find it so I went looking for it but I still don't know where it is so maybe you'll go get it for me because there's just one little thing I need to check," Bigelow said, the syllables coming out so breathlessly fast they almost sounded like one impossibly long German word.

He watched McCoy's gaze move from his face to the mess on Freckle Boy's desk to the granola bars in his pocket and finally to something just below his mouth. Bigelow reached up and felt a smudge of half-melted S'more chocolate on his lower lip.

"Sure," McCoy said, using the slow, soothing tone most people reserve for speaking to overexcitable children and the criminally insane. He began backing away. "I'll be right back."

By the time McCoy returned with the proof, Bigelow had finished cleaning up Timmy's cube (and his own chin) and had scurried back to his office. Bigelow had time to affix a look of bland, businesslike calm on his face, yet McCoy still seemed unnerved. He came at Bigelow with his arm stretched out and the proof page extended before him like a sword. When Bigelow took hold of the heavy paper, McCoy stutter-stepped away quickly, not turning his back.

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"Let me know if you need anything else!" McCoy said as he moonwalked out the door.

Bigelow knew what was coming next. Other staffers would begin drifting in, both alone and in carpool bunches, and McCoy would greet them all the same way: "Guess who I caught going through our cubicles this morning?"

Bigelow had been staring at them all with suspicion the last few days. Now they'd be staring at him the same way. He didn't think he could face it.

And then he realized he didn't have to. He had an office with a door, not an open-air cube. He could stay right here at his desk all day. And instead of going out to hunt for his Secret Santa, he could just sit and wait for the S.O.B. to come to him.

Like Sandberg's office, his had a glass wall running along the hallway. It had vertical blinds that hung from ceiling to floor, and Bigelow got up and closed them. Then he went back to his desk, sat facing the doorway, and began to wait. Sooner or later, he hoped, he'd see a face peeking around the door or someone casually moseying past his office with an innocent-looking bag in his hand. That would be Santa, scouting for an opportunity to drop off his latest slap in the face. And Bigelow would have him. All he had to do was wait and watch.

He lasted forty-two minutes. The only cubicle he could see from his desk was Marcy's, and she arrived thirty-four minutes after he began his vigil. She gave him a wave when she first showed up, then shot increasingly quizzical glances his way as he continued staring in her direction.

"Do you need something, Erik?" she called out to him.

"No!" he shouted back. "I'm fine!"

A couple of minutes later, she turned to look at him again.

"Are you sure you don't need something?"

"I'm fine!"

He wasn't fine. His bladder had been tormenting him for nearly half an hour. He'd toyed with the idea of moving his garbage can under his desk and attempting a clandestine potty break, but the risks were too great. Finally, he had to jump up and make a dash for the men's room, every step sending searing spasms across his groin.

When he got back to his desk, there was a package sitting on it.

"HO! HO! HO!" it said.

Bigelow rushed up the hallway and around the corner. The door to Sandberg's office was open, and the light inside was on.

Bigelow cursed, and a few heads popped up over cubicle walls to goggle at him. He turned, hurried back to his office, and slammed the door shut behind him.

In seconds, the wrapping paper was shredded and the box

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ripped open to reveal a bottle of Oxy 10, a tube of Clearasil, and a booklet touting the benefits of membership in the Hair Club for Men. Bigelow howled and sent the box and its contents flying across the room to crash into the glass wall.

He should've toughed it out. Or at least locked the door behind him so Santa couldn't get in and . . .

Wait. His door had a lock. Just like Sandberg's.

A new plan took shape in Bigelow's mind. He left his office and headed to Marcy's cube.

"You know what?" he said. "There *is* something I need. I lost the key to my office the other day and I have to go make a copy. Could you loan me the masters?"

"Sure," Marcy said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a key ring with five keys on it. "Here you go. I'm not sure which one's for your door."

"Don't worry," Bigelow said, smiling. "I'll figure it out."

He was so excited to set his plan into motion, he didn't even bother going back to his office to grab his hat and coat before dashing for the elevator. An hour later he was back from the locksmith's shop, feeling chilled but brilliant. When he gave the keys back to Marcy, he had copies of all five tucked away in his pocket.

Waiting to try them out proved to be almost as painful as resisting the urge to pee had earlier. His patience frayed further with each passing hour, and he found it more and more difficult to keep up the pretense that he was working. Crowley was around again, so he had to try. But Bigelow spent most of his day just sitting at his desk watching the clock tick off a countdown to revenge. When Crowley stopped in to blather about steroids and the Federation of Historical Jar Collectors, Bigelow couldn't even work up the energy to look interested, and the excuses he found to throw jabs at Sandberg lacked their usual slick subtlety.

He watched the time crawl by with agonizing slowness until five o'clock. Then he went home and watched it crawl even slower until nine. Then he went back.

He looked for lights or signs of movement before going into the building. The third floor—Now!'s floor—was dark. Both *DVD Now!* and *Antiques Now!* had been close to wrapping up a day early. It looked as if they'd made it. If they hadn't, a few designers and editors would still be up there racing toward the finish line.

Well, hooray for you, McCoy, Bigelow thought. *Hooray for you, Starr. Hooray for you, Sandberg.*

You bastard.

It didn't take him long to find it once he got up to the office. Sandberg, thinking his treachery was safe behind a locked door, hadn't even bothered to hide it.

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Sitting under Sandberg's desk was a cardboard box. In it were scissors, Scotch tape, and a roll of *HO! HO! HO!* wrapping paper.

And a bar of Irish Spring soap.

And a stick of extra-strength Right Guard deodorant.

And a catalog of Russian mail-order brides.

A shudder of rage passed over Bigelow, but it faded quickly. Justice was at hand. Vengeance was his.

He'd brought a box with him from home. It wasn't large, having originally contained a small bust of Mr. Spock that was now hanging from Bigelow's Christmas tree. But it was heavy.

He wrapped it with the HO!-covered paper and left it on Sandberg's chair with a note taped to the top.

"For Alex," the note read, "from your Secret Santa."

Bigelow locked Sandberg's office again on his way out. Then he went home and got the first decent night's sleep he'd had in days.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19

There was no gift waiting on Bigelow's desk when he moseyed in at nine-thirty the next morning. At first that puzzled him, but then he understood.

Sandberg knew he'd been busted. Why bother with the final insults if Bigelow had already seen them the night before?

It had been a war of nerve and intellect, and Bigelow had won. Sandberg had conceded.

Or maybe not, Bigelow thought a moment later. Maybe Sandberg was out right now dredging up some fresh mud to hurl his way. Maybe the gift Bigelow had left had inspired him to cook up something truly demented—or even dangerous.

Bigelow felt a twinge of the old anxiety, a twist of the knot in his stomach. He stood and stalked up the hallway past Sandberg's office.

Sandberg was in, of course. Mr. Dependable.

But there was no sign of the package Bigelow had left for him twelve hours earlier. He walked past the office again just to be sure. And then again two more times, in case Sandberg wanted to say something to him—preferably something that would bring things to a definitive conclusion, like, "Damn you and your wily ways, Bigelow! That's the last time I try to tangle with the likes of you!"

Sandberg either didn't notice him or chose to ignore him. The same couldn't be said of the *DVD Now!* staff. Bigelow had been pacing back and forth in front of their cubicles without even realizing it, and now they were watching him bounce this way and that like the crowd following the ball at Wimbledon.

"Is there something I can do for you, Erik?" McCoy asked him.

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"No, I'm just . . . you know," Bigelow said. He began a retreat back to his office.

Freckled Tim said something as he left. Bigelow couldn't quite make out what it was, though he was certain he heard the phrase "granola bars." And laughter.

He closed the door behind him when he got back to his office. The door stayed closed for the next two hours. Bigelow spent that time frozen at his desk imagining the myriad humiliating ways Sandberg could one-up him.

He was fixating on the nasty things Sandberg could do to the frozen mini-pizzas he sometimes kept in the refrigerator in the staff lunchroom when there was a knock on his door.

"Who is it?" he screeched, hardly recognizing his own voice it was pitched so high.

The door opened and Marcy leaned in. Marcy leaning into a room was one of Bigelow's favorite sights, especially if she was wearing a particularly loose-fitting blouse. Today she had on a bulky turtleneck sweater with Santa's face crocheted across the front, but Bigelow was too agitated to be disappointed by the obstructed view.

"Why aren't you down in the conference room?" Marcy asked.

"Why should I be in the conference room?"

"Didn't you read the memo?"

"What memo?"

Marcy rolled her large brown eyes. "The memo that says we're having the Christmas party today instead of Monday if *DVD Now!* and *Antiques Now!* get done early."

"Oh. The staff party." Thoughts of cardboard cookies, alcohol-free "punch," and awkward small talk with the little people danced in Bigelow's head. "Well, I don't think I can . . ."

"Crowley's there."

". . . be there for more than a minute or two with everything I've got going on, but of course I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Good. See ya there."

Bigelow felt the sudden urge to burst into Peter Jarry's office and demand a shot of Jim Beam. He settled for a few fistfuls of freebie fancy nuts instead. He hoped the weight of the cashews and almonds would settle his stomach, help him feel less like a Macy's parade float on a particularly windy Thanksgiving morning. It didn't work, and he set off for the conference room feeling queasy and over-salted.

Did he *imagine* that a hush fell over the room when he entered? Was it just *paranoia* that told him everyone was watching him as he walked up to the snack table and loaded a plate with cookies and Hershey's Kisses? Bigelow wasn't sure. But when he took a bite of a star-shaped cookie, the crunch seemed to echo through

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the room like thunder. The silence that followed was so profound he was almost afraid to chew.

He'd spotted Crowley and Jarry huddled together in a corner, and he was heading for that oasis of management-level camaraderie when Marcy walked to the center of the room with two large shopping bags.

"Well," she said, "now that everyone's here, we may as well let the fun and games begin. So . . . we're all just dying to find out who our Secret Santas are, right?"

There was a smattering of applause and one halfhearted "woo-woo," but Bigelow could barely hear it over the high-revving *thump-thump* of his heart.

"Great," Marcy said. "Because today's the day all is revealed. I took the liberty of collecting all the last Secret Santa gifts this morning." She raised up the bags in her hand, then set them on the floor. "I'll just pull one out at random and we'll see who it's for."

In the three seconds that followed, a debate raged in Bigelow's mind. Which would be worse: Opening the "gift" from Sandberg or having Sandberg open the "gift" from him?

Definitely the latter, he decided just as Marcy pulled out the box he'd left on Sandberg's desk the night before.

Marcy read the note out loud—"For Alex, from your Secret Santa"—then walked the present over to the other side of the room, where Sandberg had been chatting with McCoy and Starr.

"Wait," Bigelow tried to say, but his mouth was still full of cookie, and all that came out was a spray of moist crumbs.

He started to move toward Sandberg, but it was too late. By the time he got there, Marcy, McCoy, and Starr were all staring in horror at the open box in Sandberg's hands.

" 'This is what people get when they try to mess with me,' " Sandberg said, reading out the note taped to the inside lid of the box. "'Erik Bigelow.'"

Nearby staff members began to crowd around, all of them quickly backing off with a loud "Ewwwww!" when they saw what Bigelow had stuffed into the package. The Ewwww-ing grew even louder when the stench began to waft into the room.

Bantha was a very large dog, and the contents of the box were still reasonably fresh.

"That is *sick,* Bigelow," Starr said.

"What is it?" Crowley asked.

Starr told him in a single, blunt word. It hit Crowley like a slap, and his muscular neck tensed up tight.

"What is wrong with you, man?" he snapped at Bigelow.

"Wait," Bigelow said. "You don't understand. Look at this."

He ran to the shopping bags in the middle of the room and began pulling out presents, tossing the ones he didn't want over

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his shoulder. Some of the boxes made hard, ugly, shattering sounds when they landed, and voices were calling for Bigelow to stop, but he knew he had to act fast. He found what he was looking for at the very bottom of one of the bags. He grabbed the package with the *HO! HO! HO!* wrapping paper and held it aloft.

"You think that was insulting? Well, look at this!" he yelled.

He tore off the wrapping and clawed open the box underneath.

A Snickers bar fell out.

And a bag of Peanut M&Ms.

And a ten-dollar Red Lobster gift card.

"What?" Bigelow screamed. "What is this crap?"

"Well, Erik," replied a quiet, trembly female voice.

Bigelow turned to see Marcy, looking teary-eyed and frightened, huddling behind Sandberg.

"You're always forgetting your lunch," she said.

And at last he knew who his Secret Santa really was. It was the person who could monitor his comings and goings better than anyone because her cubicle was right outside his office. The person who'd watched as his insecurities had pushed him to destroy anyone he thought could be a rival. The person who sat near his door and heard him tell Crowley what a waste Sandberg was. The person who'd heard him say the same things about everyone else he'd managed to get fired. The person who knew he stole people's mail, because she was the one who brought it to his desk. The person who already had her own key to Sandberg's office. The person who knew his neuroses well enough to find a way to exploit them. The person who had walked into his office with a hatful of paper slips that all had the same name written on them.

The person who had set him up.

He saw the hint of a smile behind the mask of fear she was wearing now, and he knew everything. But it was all too much to explain, so he didn't try. Instead, he just howled like an angry monkey and lunged at Marcy.

He knew he wouldn't make it, and he didn't. Sandberg and Starr and McCoy stopped him. He flailed at them, spitting obscenities, until Crowley stepped up and ended the fight with one powerful punch from his little childlike fist.

Words and phrases floated in and out of Bigelow's ears as he lay there amidst the gifts he'd scattered across the floor. "911." "Police." "Weird." "Klepto." "Grudge." "Obsession." "Sandberg." "Granola bars."

There were other things he didn't hear, though they bounced around inside his skull nonetheless. "Freak." "Fired." "Wal-Mart." And the sound of Marcy's voice as she looked up into Sandberg's eyes later that day, after Bigelow had been carted away.

"Merry Christmas, boss," she would say. ●

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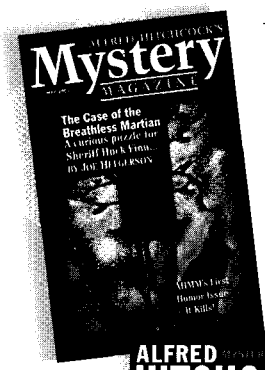

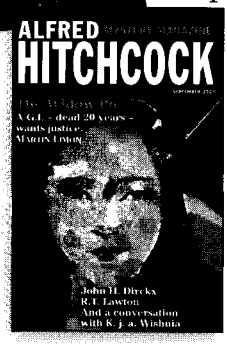

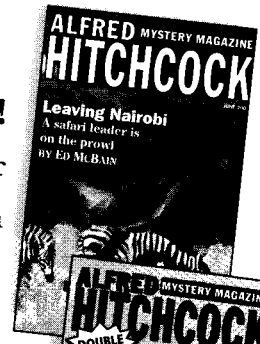

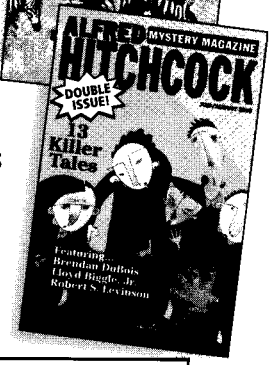

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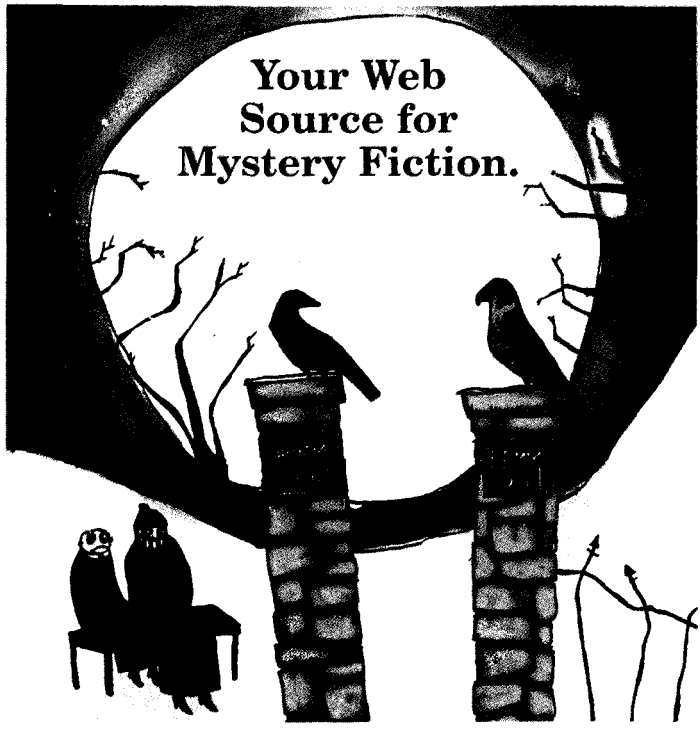

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